ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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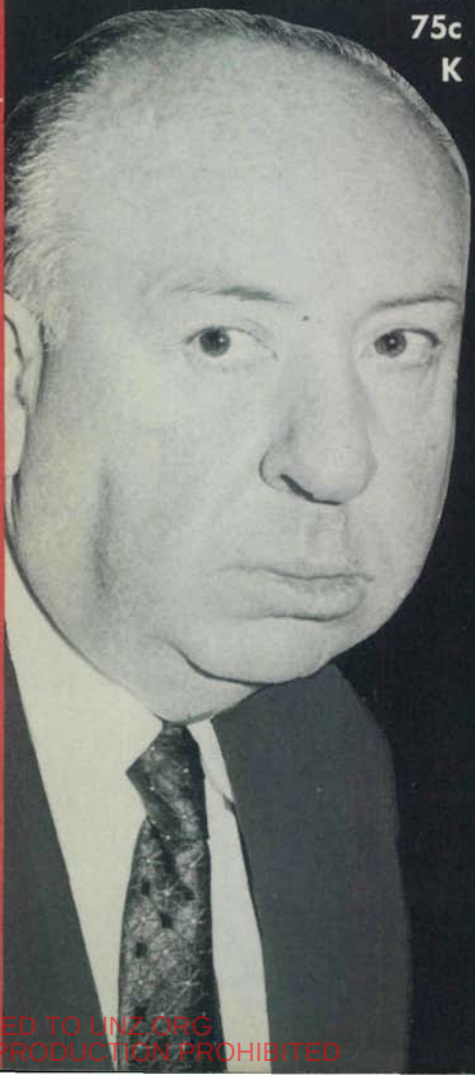

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

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November 1975

Dear Reader:

Chill winds are gathering force for the winter campaign, making the ground yield begrudgingly to spade-work. Nevertheless, this month I offer a lineup of other shivers to take the bluster out of the meteorological variety. With all the care exercised by a grave-robber, I have dug up and pried open and viewed the contents of many a contribution to bring you this midnight gathering of outstanding specimens of the storyteller's art.

The labor was worth it. From *Paint the Town Black* by Robert Colby, who proposes a singular tax for a certain segment of society, to *Pain Killer* by Frank Sisk, who turns up a unique use for sawdust, I am sure you will lay down your own tools to repose upon a convenient bier and witness all my new discoveries.

I trust you will judge them as deserving of your wait since last month's issue, and find nothing but

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 20, NO. 11 NOVEMBER 1975

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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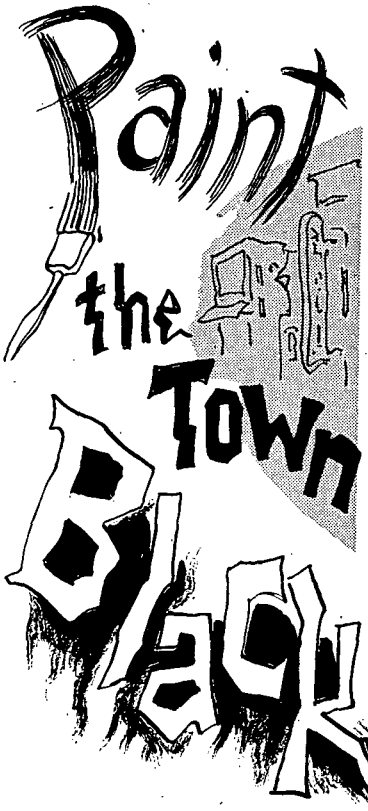

BY Robert Colby

On a warm Saturday night near 10 o'clock, leaving his rented sedan on a dismal side street, Brock strolled along the dusky walks toward the gleaming heart of the city. A man of medium height and build, his face appeared a bit wide-eyed and startled, as if he were a visitor in an alien land which he found full of curious and entertaining surprises.

His manner of dress, though excessive, was quite grand. He wore a handsomely fashioned blue blazer, a burgundy-colored monogrammed shirt, a pearl-gray tie fastened with an emerald-studded gold pin, and pearl-gray slacks. His black custom shoes, of a fine soft leather, had the polished ebony luster of fresh tar. His gold wristwatch was embellished by a dial of ruby chips; his large diamond ring had the wink of flawless quality.

The littered streets at the edge of the city where Brock had

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parked his car were dimly lighted. The neighborhood was oppressively cheerless with its night gloom of sealed, grimy factories, warehouses and machine shops, these flanked by disconsolate wood frame houses, dreary rooming places and dingy beer joints.

Apparently undismayed, Brock sprang onward with a happy step. Aimed for the bright lights, he was just passing through, gaping in wonder at the squalid caves of the poor.

He came now to a street of shabby houses with drawn blinds. At the end of this block there was a thin slash of brilliance spilling from a dive billed as *Jolly Jack's*, where a wan twist of sputtering neon tersely proclaimed: *Beer-Eats-Pool.*

As Brock arrived at the entrance he paused and peered inside. A boisterous welter of humans, mostly men in assorted rough clothing, sat or stood about the bar. A few women and their men squatted at little wooden tables behind massive pitchers of sallow beer and various "eats." Beyond, in a smoke-hazy corner of the room, shirt-sleeved players hunched over a pool table.

Harsh sounds drifted from Jolly Jack's—a rasping discord of jabbering voices peaked by ascendant cries and whistles and the sudden bark of laughter.

Plucking a gold lighter from his pocket, Brock flamed a cigarette. Puffing, he observed the scene with a faint smile of amusement. Just inside the doorway a beer-bellied, meaty-faced man with sly, roving eyes, studied Brock with a look of bold speculation. Brock grinned and shrugged, as if apologizing for the intrusion. Beer-belly stared vacantly, then moved away.

Moments later, Brock saw him huddling with a lanky youth at

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the other end of the bar. When this one, squinting over Beerbelly's shoulder, looked toward him cautiously, Brock went on again, striding into the night toward the great misty glare of the city.

He had gone a couple of blocks when he sensed the stealthy presence of someone behind him and turned. In the half-light from the feeble lamp at the corner, he saw two young men, bearded and bushy-haired. As tall and lithe as basketball champions, they wore skintight jeans, black zippered jackets, and sneakers.

The pair were only a few yards back and instantly, as Brock turned, they closed the distance, dancing up to him on silent feet. Weapons appeared and were extended toward him. These were a long slender switchblade knife and a stubby, nickel-plated revolver.

"Quick, man, lay the bread on us!" said the gun toter who, beside Brock, seemed a man on stilts.

"Yeah, and don't hold nothin' back," said the other with the blade, "or I'm gonna spill blood and guts all over the ground." He spoke in a whispery voice, punctuating the threat with a delighted grin that was faulted by a missing front tooth.

Brock lifted his hand in a gesture of submission. "Now—now listen, boys, just don't hurt me and I'll give you what I've got," he said in a voice softly accented by a Texas drawl. "I don't have more'n a few bucks in cash. I use my credit cards for most all—"

"You got *cash*, man!" the gunman said with a clenched jaw. "Rich dude like you got *plenty* cash." He lifted the .38 and dropped a lean thumb over the hammer. "Now let's have it!"

"First the green stuff," said the blade man. "Then you kin peel that ring with the fat diamond, the tiepin and the watch. C'mon, move it! Or I'm gonna stick you good."

Brock hesitated, and the blade man gave the knife a savage upward thrust at his throat. If he hadn't ducked with astonishing speed, grabbing the knife arm and hurling the man over his shoulder so that he was grounded with bone-crushing force, the blade would have impaled his jugular.

Even as the blade man was launched into the air, Brock's foot was mightily ramming the chest of his partner with the gun, so that both actions were nearly simultaneous. As the gunman stumbled backward Brock chopped his neck with a blow that caused him to collapse in a mindless heap. The .38 had fallen to the ground

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nearby. Brock stowed it in a pocket of his blazer.

The blade man, making agonized sounds, was trying desperately to rise. Brock stood above him and said, "Ah, you poor boy, how I hate to see you suffer. Here, let me give you something for the pain." Brock put him out with a careful boot to the head, one that would insure the equivalent of a brutal Saturday night hangover when he awoke.

Locating the switchblade, he snapped it closed and consigned it to a pocket of his pearl-gray

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slacks. Now he searched the blade man. The robber was not carrying a wallet. He had nothing but a set of keys and a thin roll of bills fastened with a rubber band. Brock counted the money. "Eighty-two bucks," he murmured. "Not bad for a two-bit mugger." He fed the bills into his wallet and gleefully tossed the ring of keys into a trash barrel as he crossed to the sprawling accomplice. From this one he collected $34.00 contained in a money clip.

At the corner he examined the nickel-plated .38 revolver. It was the cheapest sort of weapon, but a gun is a gun, and the cheapies kill you just as dead.

Returning the .38 to his pocket, he set his tie, needlessly brushed his clothing, and continued on his way, taking jaunty strides toward the cheerful blaze of the night city.

Along Broad Street near the center of town there were a number of gaudy-faced dens, tourist traps with murky interiors where lonely singles prowled for pickups. Brock discarded several after a quick check inside, then selected a club identified in green neon script as *The Hideout.*

When he had adjusted to the pallid lighting, he noted that spaced between the couples at the mirrored crescent bar there were three unescorted girls in various attractive shapes and sizes, though all had the same hard, glittering appeal.

As he approached the bar one of the girls glanced up to appraise him with saucy eyes. She had a long tumble of deep black hair, a mischievous mouth and a pushy little prow of a chin. Her features were slightly diminished by a too-prominent nose—but even had she been homely the obvious enticements of her figure would have earned immediate forgiveness from Brock.

He dismissed the other two as runner-ups and went to stand at the vacant stool next to the girl with the saucy eyes.

"Buy you a drink?" he asked with a small polite bow.

She inspected him coolly. "I never drink with a man I don't know," she said with a snooty tilt of her chin. Abruptly she smiled. "So why don't you sit down and introduce yourself?"

He grinned and settled beside her. "My name is Brock and I like a gal with a sense of humor."

"I'm Carmen," she told him. "Carmen Taylor." She adjusted the strap of her dress, a white satin gown with a distracting neckline.

He studied her. "You must be all of 25, Carmen. And pretty. So

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why do you sit alone in a bar?"

"One of my boyfriends showed up drunk tonight. I mean—reeling! We had a date for dinner and the whole scene, but I sent him away. Do you blame me?"

She sipped from a glass that was nearly empty. Brock beckoned and the bartender appeared. An eager young man with a toothy smile, he had a ruffle of dark hair and a tidy moustache.

"Yes, *sir,* what'll it be for you and the lady?" he asked extravagantly.

"I'm having a stinger," Carmen announced.

"Two stingers, then," said Brock.

"Would you like to have those here, sir? Or in one of the booths?"

The barkeep exploded another flashbulb smile and Brock followed his gaze to a row of partitioned booths. Set in the shadowed rear of The Hideout, these were curtained by a transparent material behind which, in the subdued glow of candlelight, couples were vaguely defined.

Brock glanced at Carmen.

"It might be more comfortable," she said. "If we're going to make an evening of it," she added suggestively.

"Take any booth that's vacant, sir," said the bartender, "and I'll send a waitress for your order."

All the booths but one were occupied. They slipped into it and Brock lighted a candle that had been left on the table beside a vase of artificial flowers. In a minute the bartender arrived with their drinks. "Heavy night," he said. "All the girls're busy, so I brought the first round myself."

He placed the drinks before them with elaborate care, as if this were an act requiring unusual skill. Then he said, "I'm just pinch-hitting for one of the regulars who got sick, and I'm goin' off duty now. So if there's anything else, sir . . ."

Brock gave him a five, the waiter beamed and went away.

Carmen sat languidly, her pretty features dramatized by the light and shadow of candlelight. In contrast, her long, artistic fingers toyed with a pendant dangling from a gold necklace. The pendant was a delicately wrought lotus made of fine jade.

"Beautiful necklace," Brock said. "You don't see jade of that quality very often."

"Yes, it's the one piece I own that isn't phony. It's Imperial jade, present from a guy who bought it in Hong Kong."

Brock put down his drink and stretched his hand to display the diamond ring. "You like jewelry—

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just have a good peek at that."

She took his hand, moved it toward the candle flame, and bent to examine the stone minutely. After a long moment she looked up with an expression of awe. "It's—it's magnificent," she said. "Truly magnificent!"

"How much do you think it's worth?"

Her gaze descended and became riveted once more to the diamond. "I'll bet it's worth a small fortune." She released his hand reluctantly. Lips pursed, she posed the question with frowning concentration. "Twenty-five thousand?"

He said nothing.

"More?"

He nodded slowly.

She sat back limply, as if the effort of appraisal had left her drained. After a few moments of musing silence she said, "You don't come from around here, do you?" Her eyes came to rest upon the emerald-studded, gold tiepin. "I mean, you sound a little Southern."

"Texas," he said. "Near Fort Worth."

"Oh? And what line are you in?"

"I have a cattle ranch."

"My! It must be very profitable."

"Not always." He twirled an empty glass. "Wildcatter found a mess of oil on my property, though. That helped some." He fired a cigarette with his gold lighter, facets of the diamond winking in the flame.

"Hey, you got it made!" she said. "I hear that you Texas oil people pump so much oil money in a single day you don't even bother to keep track of it!" She laughed harshly, her head thrown back to expose the pulsing column of her dainty throat.

"That kind of talk is plain dumb," he answered with a snort. "We keep score like anyone else."

She gulped her drink, twirled the pendant. "You're married, of course."

He shook his head. "Widower. Going on three years now." He sat back, yawned.

"Yeah?" Her eyes widened. "You taking applications for a replacement?"

"Nope. I like it this way. Free to roam."

She shrugged. "So what're you doing in town?"

"Roaming. Having myself a time."

She began a monologue, telling him about her own life—married, divorced, a series of jobs—from nightclub waitress to show girl in Vegas.

He listened politely. There was

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a silence. He yawned again. His eyes dropped.

"The company or the hour?" Carmen asked with a giggle.

He made no answer, just stared with a fixed expression. He kept blinking his eyes, finally closing them, head nodding to his chest. Then he slid sideways to the seat of the booth, where he remained in the boneless posture of oblivion.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" Carmen whined. "You going to sleep?" She moved in close to shake him. "Brock? Brock! Now c'mon, honey, wake up!" She began slapping his face, really belting it. "Oh, man, you're far out of it," she said. Then she went to work.

She lifted the diamond ring first, with some difficulty because it demanded a lot of persuading. The wrist of the same hand gave up the watch without a struggle, the tiepin was no problem at all. The wallet took some maneuvering of his body until she could slide her fingers into the hip pocket and yank it loose.

Then it was done. She had put everything into her purse and was rising to leave when Brock grabbed her from behind, encircling her waist, locking her in. She made a little gasp, turned with gaping mouth and enormous eyes, struggling to get free.

"Next time," he said, "you wanna be sure to check *all* the pockets." He brought the nickel-plated .38 from his jacket and casually angled the barrel toward her face.

"What will you do?" she said with a sneer of bravado. "Shoot me?"

He put the gun away and she said, "Listen, how did you know?"

"I've been burned by the best and I could smell your act in the wind, baby. When that bar jockey steered us to a booth and delivered the drinks himself, I figured mine was a sleeper. So while you had your greedy eyes on the diamond I poured the stuff into this vase and faked you out."

He opened her purse, turned it upside down on the table and recovered his possessions. She had a billfold containing money and a driver's license. He examined the license.

"I see that you live right here on this street," he said. "Convenient, huh? And your real name is Ingrid—Ingrid Froelich. You got a record under that name, Ingrid?"

Fear jumped into her eyes. "Why? You gonna turn me in to the cops?"

He chuckled. "That's funny. What's in it for me? A reward? Big price on your head?" He re-

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moved her money and counted it. "Only forty-six bucks, Ingrid? Where do you keep the heavy cash? At home?"

As she watched in astonishment, he tucked her bills into his own wallet.

"Why did you do that?" she asked him.

"There's a tax on evil," he explained. "And I'm the collector." He searched further in her billfold and came up with cards promoting a place called Marco's Riviera. Below the address were the words: *Admit bearer to the exclusive VIP Club for distinguished guests.* It was signed: *Tony Marco.*

"What sort of clip joint is this Marco's Riviera?"

"I don't know," she said sullenly.

"Sure you do."

She hesitated. "OK, it's a nightclub with gambling in a private room upstairs called the VIP Club. I was a waitress there, serving drinks to the players."

"I can guess the routine," he said. "You send big spenders to Marco with these cards and he cuts you in for a finder's fee."

She nodded. "Fifty bucks a head."

"Anyone can walk in with these cards? How do they swing it in a nice, clean city like this?"

"Easy. They got juice flowing to the right people all the way to the top."

"The old payoff, huh?" He kept one of the cards and fingered through the spill from her purse. There was nothing but some cosmetics and a ring of keys. He put the keys in his pocket, the remainder in the purse.

"Now, Ingrid," he said, "the party's over and I'm gonna escort you home."

"You mean to *my* place?"

"That's right."

"No, no! We can't go there!"

"Wanna bet?"

"But Freddy, my boyfriend, has a key and he'll be waiting there."

"The barman who mixes the knockout drinks?"

She nibbled her lip. "He's mean. He has a violent temper."

"Is that so? How distressing. Well, perhaps I will be able to subdue him if he becomes physical. Shall we go?"

It was an ugly old building in the next block. At the door to her third-floor apartment he returned the keys and held a warning finger to his lips for silence. She let him in with a trembling hand; he closed the door gently.

The livingroom was lighted by a single lamp. A television had been turned on. In shirt sleeves, Freddy sat viewing the picture intently as he downed a highball.

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Not until they were well into the room did he turn his head. For a moment he sat rooted. Then he sprang from his chair, eyes darting wildly, as if he were hunting a weapon.

Abruptly he smashed the highball glass against the base of a lamp, showering the floor with liquid and ice. Then he advanced in a crouch, the jagged spokes of glass thrust before him.

"Be careful, Freddy!" Ingrid cried. "He's got a gun!"

Since Brock only waited with arms folded placidly across his chest, Freddy leaped and shoved the shattered glass at his face.

Brock stepped neatly aside, tripped the bartender and hastened his fall with a blow to the back of his neck. Merely stunned, Freddy came to his knees and seemed about to continue the assault, but then he saw that in falling he had cut his hand severely on the broken shards of glass. Losing interest in the fight, he sat inspecting his raised palm from which blood gushed steadily down his arm.

"You stupid slut!" he bellowed at Ingrid. "Why did you bring this yokel here?"

"I couldn't help it," she pleaded. "He caught me in the act and he—"

"OK, you blew it! So don't just stand there, idiot. Can't you see I'm bleeding to death!"

"I think he's cut an artery," Brock said cheerfully. "Ingrid, pass me his wallet. Hurry now! Freddy will need a doctor and he won't get one until I leave."

She located the wallet in his hip pocket and Brock relieved it of $93.00. "This will never do," he said with a woeful shake of his head. "Couple of clever crooks in your class must clean at least a dozen suckers a week. All right, Freddy, where's the heavy cash?"

Sweating, his eyes glazed, Freddy was oblivious as he tried to stem the crimson tide with a handkerchief.

"I'll get the money!" Ingrid said hysterically, and bolted from the room. She was back in half a minute with a metal box containing a wad of pawn tickets and several packets of currency fastened with bands of paper.

Brock thumbed through the larger bills and made a rough estimate of three-grand-plus. Swiftly he stowed the money in various pockets of his natty blue blazer and pearl-gray slacks. "Now get me a strip of cloth," he ordered. "Also a ruler or something of the kind—any firm piece of wood or metal."

When she brought these items, Brock fashioned a tourniquet

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above Freddy's wound and twisted the ruler to apply pressure. A fastidious person, he was especially careful not to spot his clothing with Freddy's blood. Leaving the bartender to hold the ruler in position, he went toward the door and motioned to Ingrid to follow.

"Freddy-boy is in no great danger," he assured her. "More scared than hurt. Release the pressure now and then, tell him to take two aspirin and see a doctor." His eyes drifted down to the necklace with the jade lotus pendant. He fingered the pendant with a thoughtful expression. "Sure do like this necklace, Ingrid. Yeah, I know a little Texas gal who could wear it in great style."

"Ah, don't take that from me, too," she begged. "I swear to you, I didn't steal it. And it's the last thing I own that Freddy hasn't hocked."

He pursed his lips, nodded. "Keep it. Wear it in good health."

"Oh, thank you!" she said with a deep sigh.

"Not at all." He grinned, opened the door. "It's been a real pleasure to do business with you folks."

He went out.

Twenty minutes later Brock entered a building with an opulent facade of black marble decorated by a diagonal splash of white neon announcing: *Marco's Riviera.* Inside to the right there was a dusky lounge; to the left, separated by a corridor leading toward an elevator, was a large semicircular room with tables surrounding a dance floor and stage. Presently the supper show was in progress, chorus girls in scanty costumes doing their thing.

An arrow on a sign reading: VIP Club (members only), sent Brock to the elevator. Here a uniformed guard wearing sidearms onced-him-over, inspected the card he had swiped from Ingrid, and took him aloft to a cocktail lounge with piano bar. It was dominated by a young female performer on a raised platform. Dressed in a sequined gown, she sang a bluesy song in a sultry voice.

A door at the rear of the lounge was guarded by a formidable bouncer-type in a tuxedo, who was screening patrons before passing them through. Brock presented his card with the Tony Marco signature. The guard fingered a button and the door was opened from within by a uniformed security man.

The gaming room of Marco's Riviera could have been transplanted from Las Vegas. Beyond the rows of slot machines in frantic play there were three crap and

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half a dozen blackjack tables, a roulette wheel and a flashing bingo board. Well-dressed gamblers sat or stood in a shoulder-to-shoulder crush at every table. Mini-skirted waitresses hustled about with trays of drinks, and only an alcove bar provided a refuge from the harsh lights, the pulsing waves of hectic sound. Armed, uniformed guards were stationed strategically about the room.

Brock waited until there was an empty chair at one of the blackjack tables. He bought ten one-hundred-dollar chips, got fine cards and won almost every hand with ease. However, after more than doubling his stake, though he still turned up good cards, the dealer started beating him steadily by a point or two.

A veteran gambler who had been taught every cheating device known to man by a talented hustler, Brock was amused. His trained eye told him that the dealer was a skilled "mechanic" who was using a bust-out man to switch in a fixed deck called a *cooler.*

The bust-out man, a shill employed by the house, was a mousy little guy at the other end of the table who seemed just one of the players—but when it was his turn to cut the cards he switched in the cooler and gave it a gypsy cut. Meanwhile, the honest deck had been snatched up his sleeve by a claw-and-spring contraption.

From that moment the outcome was inevitable, but when the house had cleaned only a few of his winning chips, Brock left the game and moved with purpose to the most crowded of the three crap tables. Here it was possible to stand on the fringes and check for gimmicks without arousing suspicion. For it was his educated guess that if the house had rigged one game, it had rigged them all.

Covertly racing his eye over the scene from every angle, he soon observed that the stickman was controlling the dice by slyly toeing a button beneath the rug when a heavy bet was placed. The button, Brock well understood, would cut in a magnetic field which attracted magnetized copper filings mixed invisibly with the paint of the spots on the dice. When the pressure on the button was released, the game could be played straight. Or if the house wanted the sucker to win a few as a hook, a second button reversed the magnetic field to bring up winning numbers.

The primary target of this game was obviously a big paunchy man with thrusting authoritarian features. He was losing thousands

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while cursing his luck, the dice and any player he backed who cost him money on the line.

A waitress was serving drinks to some of the players at the table and as she left with an empty tray, Brock halted her to ask, with a five-spot in hand, "Who's the important type at the end of the table, big guy betting a grand a roll?"

"That's Harley Fenton," she said. "He's a millionaire, owns the *Herald* and I dunno what all. He's been a regular customer downstairs but he never came up here before until last night. Crazy." She did a tongue-in-cheek. "Well, they say his wife's in Europe . . ."

Brock thanked her with the five. He was delighted. With a man of Fenton's caliber, the situation was ripe for plucking. First, however, he would have to prove the swindle by taking possession of one of the cubes and testing it with a tiny horseshoe magnet he carried habitually on his key chain. That would be extremely dangerous, but Brock was a man who lived dangerously, and now he went to the men's room, separated the magnet from the chain and returned.

With some tight maneuvering he was able to work his way in beside Harley Fenton, the high roller. When it was Brock's turn with the dice, he shook them mightily, faked spilling one from fist to floor, while in truth he caught it deftly in his other hand below the table. Then, as he bent in pretense of scanning the carpet for the lost cube, he slipped it into a pocket of his blazer next to the magnet.

When his fingers confirmed that it was love at first sight, with the cube and magnet united in a close embrace, he knew that he had won the first round.

The stickman and the dealers scrambled to join in the fruitless search for the missing cube and were aided by a sweep-up, but the players demanded that the game be resumed. So the housemen, gazing at Brock with walled faces and chilled eyes, were forced to trade his single cube for a pair. Sure that the electronic gadget would be turned off while the house sized him up as an innocent bungler or a ringer marked for a violent lesson, Brock bet a hundred and rode five passes to a seven-out. In the process, he helped Fenton, who had placed a bet on the line.

Riffling his chips, smiling in approval at Brock, Fenton said, "Man, you're all right! You shoot better than all the rest of these clowns put together. Stick around,

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will ya? I'm down sixty-five thousand and you could bring me some luck."

"Nah, I got a bad leg," Brock composed. "Old injury acting up. Gonna sit for a few minutes at the bar. But tell you what. Buy me a drink and I'll shoot for you when we come back. I'm hot tonight and maybe I can get you well again."

The publisher of the *Herald* scowled. "You're angling for a percentage—is that it?"

"Hell, no! Just being friendly. Forget it, pal."

"Well now, I'm sorry," Fenton said sincerely. "I owe you an apology, sir. Let's go have that drink. Then we'll show them how to break the bank, the two of us against the house."

En route to the bar, Fenton introduced himself. When they were seated at a corner booth, drinks before them, Brock confessed that his true purpose had been to lure Fenton from the game to inform him that he was being fleeced with crooked dice. Brock explained precisely how the electronic device was operated, produced the cube and magnet and gave a demonstration, doing it cautiously so that only Fenton could see.

Fenton made the test himself. Hunched over, his broad back concealing, he placed the cube on the table, positioned the magnet just above it. The cube jumped to the magnet and held fast.

Ponderous jaw descending, face flushed, Fenton looked up. "I'll be damned!" he gasped. He gazed out into the gaming room just in time to catch the pit boss squinting in their direction as he spoke with a dealer from the crooked dice table, who must have been replaced for a hasty conference.

"Guilty as kids with jam on their faces," Fenton said. "Very well, I control the most influential newspaper in this town, and I'm going to use it to expose this sewer and close it for keeps. But first I intend to have a showdown with Tony Marco and get my money back!"

"Yes, and mine, too," Brock added.

"Of course, of course." Fenton nodded. "How much did you lose?"

"Roughly ten grand, sir. Yes, in round figures, ten thousand, I'd say."

Fenton signaled and a waitress hurried over. He instructed her to get word to Tony Marco that Mr. Harley Fenton demanded to see him at once on a matter of the gravest urgency.

As they waited, Brock said, "Mr. Fenton, I'm sure you must

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be aware that without the weight of your power behind me, these hoods would muscle me into a back room and kill me before I ever hit the street."

"Don't you worry," Fenton said. "You'll leave with me, under my protection. Did you come in your own car?"

"No, sir, I'm just visiting and I'm not familiar with the city. So I left my rental in town and took a cab."

"Well, then," said Fenton, "my car is on the lot below and I'll drop you anywhere you like."

Soon, a stocky man with thick features in a round, shrewd face, arrived at the table. His formal clothes fit him as badly as his wrenching smile. "Mr. Fenton, what a be-yoo-tiful surprise!" he said with outstretched hand. "If I'da known you were up here tonight, I woulda come out to greet you myself, long time ago."

Fenton ignored the hand and now, his smile fading rapidly, the newcomer drew a chair to the table and sank into it uncertainly.

Fenton aimed a finger at him and boomed, "Marco, you slimy little creep, you owe me sixty-five thousand dollars you swindled from me at your crooked table with the magnetized dice. You also owe my good friend here ten thousand you stole from him in the same manner. I want that seventy-five thousand stacked right here in front of me in five minutes' time. Or you'll be reading about yourself and this crooked cesspool in an exposé that will fill the front page of my newspaper tomorrow morning." Fenton sat back with a sneering smile.

Marco made an odd little sound, a kind of choking chuckle. "Well, geez, that sure is a crazy thing to say to me, Mr. Fenton. I'm not gonna take that, even from you. Maybe you're putting me on, huh?"

Fenton turned to Brock. "Show him the dice you palmed from the crap table where we lost the money. Perform the clever trick with the magnet for Marco and tell him exactly how his crooked device works."

Brock went through the whole business with cube and magnet again as Marco's face hardened into a round, smooth stone. Then Marco said, "This guy is a phony trying to work a con game on you, Mr. Fenton." He shot an *I'll-get-you-buddy* look at Brock and continued. "This here is not one of our dice, sir. We run an honest house and if I ever catch my boys cheating, they'll wish they—"

"All right," said Fenton decisively as he rose from his seat, "we'll go over to the crap table in

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question and we'll test the dice with this magnet, in front of all the players. If the dice are honest, if we find no buttons hidden beneath your carpet, then no harm will be done."

That did it. Marco's eyes flashed a five-alarm fire. "No!" he said with a vigorous shake of the head. "The game is honest, but you scare my customers with a caper like that and they'll run for the door!" He stood. "Anyway, I don't want no hard feelings, Mr. Fenton. So I'm gonna get the cash to cover your losses."

He shot a deadly glance at Brock and stormed off. In a few minutes he was back with the currency in two manila envelopes, the large one containing Fenton's sixty-five thousand in hundred-dollar bills. As Marco handed the smaller envelope to Brock he said icily, "My dealers swear you didn't drop no ten grand in here. This is a squeeze, mister. And if I ever see you around, you're gonna regret it."

Counting his money, Fenton paused, looked up. "I'd advise you not to make threats, Marco," he rumbled. "This gentleman is my friend, and if he says he lost ten thousand, that's exactly what he lost."

Marco said nothing further, but watched with brooding eyes as the two men completed the count and stood to leave.

"I'm not finished with you, Marco," Fenton said. "Buy the *Herald* tomorrow and read your future for a dime."

Marco bounced up. "Now, you wait a minute, Mr. Fenton!" he growled, "I kept my end and I'm warning you, sir—"

Fenton, however, was already striding away, Brock at his heels. As they moved through the gaming room to the exit, Brock was uneasy, for the word had been passed and the eyes of nearly every houseman in the room were upon them. The strain grew almost unbearable when there was a long, unexpected wait for the elevator that would deliver them to the ground floor.

Yet, while it seemed an eternity, it was only another few minutes before they had gone through a final door to the parking lot and were crossing it to Fenton's glistening sedan. Then they were floating into the night, soaring on wings of triumph. Exhilarated, Brock eased down comfortably, resting his head against the soft upholstery.

At that moment, two shadowy forms rose from the floor in back to hover above them. Brock turned and stared into the mouth of a .45 automatic, as a .38 was

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pressed against Fenton's ear.

"Swing left at the next light, Mr. Fenton," said the man behind the .38, "then straight ahead till you dead-end at a wrecking yard." He spoke so blandly, with such detachment, he might have been discussing the weather.

"And you," said the other with the .45, "hands behind your head."

Brock obeyed, reluctantly, since there went his feeble hope of reaching for the nickel-plated revolver he had appropriated earlier from one of the tall muggers who had attempted to rob him on the street.

Fenton wheeled left at the light, saying as he did so, "If it's the money you want, take it and I won't make trouble."

There was no reply and in the silence Brock was thinking that unlike the muggers, these were a couple of cool pros. No doubt they were Marco hit men, assigned in a last-minute decision, even as he and Fenton were held in a stalling tactic at the elevator. Certain that Marco would not take such a dangerous risk with a man of Fenton's stature, Brock had been caught off guard, and was frightened, because this time he was in over his head.

"Rusty, pat these two down while I cover," said the .45.

Rusty leaned over the seat. His careful hands found no weapon on Fenton, but came up with Brock's shiny .38. "Hey, Sal," he reported, "this one is carrying."

He handed the weapon to Sal, who said, "Got an idea. We fake the robbery-kill with this dime-store shooter. That way we don't have ta get rid of our own pieces."

The suggestion pleased Rusty, who chuckled hoarsely.

When Fenton caught the picture he began to plead for his life, and by the time they pulled up at the auto-wrecking yard he was coming apart, on the verge of weeping.

The empty street, barely lighted, was hemmed with wrecking yards. Behind towering chain-wire fences, a desert of hulking wrecks lay like the skeletal remains of fallen beasts.

"Outside, both of you!" Sal ordered.

Brock opened his door, bent out slowly and turned toward Fenton who, clutching the wheel desperately, was whimpering pitifully.

The hoods exited from opposite sides, the one called Sal moving up behind Brock with the .45. Fenton was glued in terror to his seat and now Rusty locked an arm about his neck in an effort to haul Fenton's great bulk from the car.

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In these seconds of delay, his back to Sal, Brock gently released the blade of the switch knife. In the men's room of the Riviera he had secreted the weapon in the side of a shoe against such an emergency, and had grabbed it as he bent to leave the car.

Muscled by Rusty, Fenton had lost his grip on the wheel and was bleating in frenzied protest, actually screaming, when Brock whirled, smashed the gun hand aside and plunged the knife into Sal's chest. The hit man sagged with a gasp that was drowned by Fenton's cries as Rusty wrestled him off the seat to the ground. Catching Sal's wrist as he sank to his knees and began to topple over, Brock snatched the .45 and toed around to the back of the car in a crouch.

Rusty was standing over Fenton, preparing to launch him with a kick to the ribs, when Brock stepped from behind the car and shouted a command for the hood to freeze. Instead, Rusty banged off a fast, badly aimed shot, but Brock, firing precisely from a straight-arm stance, slammed a bullet through his skull.

"How do you thank a man who has just saved your life?" Fenton said when he had delivered Brock to his rented sedan.

"That depends on the man," Brock answered with a twist of smile. "If he's rich, you shake his hand and give him a pat on the back. If he's poor you lighten his burden with a few grand you'll never miss."

"You don't look poor to me," Fenton said, the spark of gratitude draining from his eyes.

"Don't let these duds deceive you," Brock replied. "They're only the window dressing of too little money and too much pride."

"How can a poor man lose ten thousand at the tables?" asked Fenton.

"He can't—and he didn't," Brock said. "Men like Marco are incurably evil. There's a tax on evil and when the spirit moves me, I appoint myself as the devil's collector." He grinned. "For a worthy cause, of course."

Fenton snorted, shook his head. "You're a strange one, all right. But con man or Robin Hood, the fact remains, you did save my life."

"And your money," Brock added quickly.

Fenton chuckled. "OK, how much?"

"Well, I'm not greedy—just hungry. You got back sixty-five grand and if we tax that with fifteen for the collector, you still take home fifty."

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Fenton counted out the money; Brock consigned the bills to the envelope containing the other ten. "I suppose I should call the police," Fenton said. "But I'm not anxious to become involved in such a messy affair. Can you handle it?"

"The best way to handle it, Mr. Fenton, is to leave it alone. The cops'll find the bodies of a couple of punk killers who probably have records up to here. They'll figure the hoods were blasted by their own kind. Good riddance, they'll tell each other in the back rooms. Out front they'll just go through the motions of an investigation. And from Marco, you'll get only silence."

Fenton nodded. "And if I need you, where will I find you?"

"You won't," Brock said. He climbed out with the cash-heavy envelope, then leaned in. "I'm like a sudden storm, Mr. Fenton. I blow into town, take my toll—then I'm gone. Nobody knows where."

With a small salute he stepped back to watch the car proceed down the block away from him.

In his hotel room, Brock poured whiskey into a tumbler, toasted the rewards of the night, drank. Crossing to a phone, he reserved a seat on the first flight out, leaving in an hour and ten minutes. Then he removed the diamond ring, the emerald-studded tiepin, the expensive watch. Peeling the blue blazer, the pearl-gray tie and slacks, the custom shoes, he packed them carefully. Next he strapped a money belt about his waist. It contained the watch and jewelry and the cash of the night's collection, an amount not much below thirty grand.

Now he donned a worn brown suit, inexpensive shoes and a watch of indifferent quality. Dressed to be fleeced by the sharks who prey upon the working man, he stood by a window overlooking the city and sipped reflectively.

The glow of the bourbon expanded a luxurious sense of well-being and satisfaction. He smiled and thought:

Tomorrow, Detroit.

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A lady of honor may be possessed of other attributes as well, it seems.

A Lady of Honor

by Margaret Maron

Malcom Reid's new secretary was a stranger to me; but when I asked if I might see him, she smiled deferentially and, before I could give my name, said, "The district attorney's on long distance, Miss Tyson, but if you'll be seated, he should be finished soon."

As I waited, I reflected that our city is still a small town at heart despite its quadrupling in the last thirty years. New suburbs have sprung up all around, boutiques and regional chains have absorbed our general stores, the old Whitley farm is now an industrial park ringed by shopping centers, and my father, Judge Andrew Tyson, has been dead several years; but the Tyson name is still respected. We settled the town, gave our name to it and have held important offices here; and although we have prospered materially, honor

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has always been valued above profit.

I'm the last Tyson and pride of name and integrity runs deeply in me; but as I waited to see the district attorney, I wished it were otherwise. If only I could have hidden in my quiet, well-ordered house in the oldest and most exclusive section of Tysonville! Since my conscience wouldn't allow that, I wished I could let the impending scandal wash over me without caring.

"He's free now, Miss Tyson," the secretary said.

I walked down a short hall to Mal's office. Mal himself stood beaming in the doorway.

"Anne! This *is* a pleasure!" He drew me inside and pulled a black leather chair closer to his desk. "You're still coming to dinner tomorrow night, aren't you? Katherine said you sounded rather odd when she phoned you yesterday."

"I'll be there unless you have me arrested," I said. "I'm afraid this isn't a social visit, Mal."

The chair was comfortable, but I couldn't relax. I'm not yet thirty-five, my legs are still good and I knew the black chair complemented my fair hair and gold wool dress; yet I'm seldom at ease with men. Even with Malcom Reid, one of my oldest friends, I could feel myself freezing up.

Although Mal can be stuffy at times, he knows I don't deliberately create the ice-maiden image which the town has always pinned on me, and he smiled as he sat down at his desk. "Now don't tell me you've run a stoplight? Part of my standard lecture to every new class of rookies is 'Rank hath no privilege, but leave Anne Tyson's car alone.' "

"That will be the day." I smiled. "If I recall, you're the only patrolman in history to tag Father's car."

"I remember. That was my first year out of law school before I got into politics. Sam Peters ran an editorial about fearless law enforcement and the equality of justice in Tysonville." He chuckled. "Of course, Judge Tyson always claimed I did it for publicity."

"Didn't you?" I teased, because that episode had done much to establish Mal as an honest and conscientious agent of the law. Father never traded on his position, but as traffic clogged our streets in his later years, he *had* become a bit cavalier about no-parking zones until rookie Mal Reid tagged his car. All water under the bridge, except that Mal is district attorney now and would be handling the case against Austin Whitley's murderer.

Austin had been Tysonville's

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only home-grown millionaire and he'd risen in true rags-to-riches tradition, including the Horatio Alger touch of marrying wealthy Amos Kilpatrick's only daughter, Eleanor, after his small electronics plant had begun to show a profit. At forty, Austin Whitley had had it all: rich wife, two sons away at prep school, an ever-expanding business and a huge mansion which he'd built among the other newly-rich on the lake side of town. Now he was dead, struck down with his own brass poker.

Wednesday evening is traditionally cooks' night out here and Eleanor had let the other servants go, too, because her mother had planned an intimate dinner party to celebrate the Whitleys' fifteenth wedding anniversary. Mrs. Kilpatrick's chauffeur had picked Eleanor up at 7 to oversee last-minute details for her semi-invalid mother, and Austin remained at home alone to dress for dinner and get in some paper work.

Dinner was scheduled for 9 and when he neither answered the telephone nor arrived by 8:30, Eleanor sent her mother's chauffeur back to check. He found the front door unlocked, the safe in the study wide open and Austin slumped over the desk, his head badly battered.

A suspect was arrested the next day, but it had taken me two days more to work up enough courage to face Mal. I wanted to leave as soon as I entered his office, but inborn standards drove me and I made myself ask, "Mal, are you completely sure that the man they've arrested is Austin's killer?"

Bewildered friendship struggled with official discretion on his face.

"Please, Mal. I'm not asking out of idle curiosity or because Austin was our friend. That Smith man's been arraigned; but from what I can gather from the newspaper and local gossip, there's no real proof he did it."

Mal sighed and official discretion lost. "Okay, Anne. What you've read in the paper is pretty much it; and no, I'm not very happy about Smith, but he seems to be the only one with any reasonable motive. He hated Austin, he doesn't have an alibi and moreover, he threatened to kill him just that afternoon."

"Because Austin fired him? No one kills just because he's been fired," I protested.

"It was more than a simple firing," explained Mal. "Smith was claiming breach of contract, and he probably had a point. We all know Austin Whitley didn't parlay a run-down farm into the biggest electronics plant in this state without bending a few ethics

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along the way. He met Smith at a trade convention a few months back, recognized his potential, and lured him down with promises of stock options and part of the company. Unfortunately, none of Austin's promises were on paper.

"Young Smith may be an electronics genius, but he doesn't seem to have had much business sense. Austin picked his brains rather thoroughly before Smith realized that Austin wasn't coming through with his part of the bargain. When he demanded his rights, Austin sneered at him, offered a token raise and told him he'd never be anything but a salaried idea man. Everyone on the floor heard Smith's reaction to Austin's insults; and when the yelling and threats peaked, Austin fired him."

"Yet if Smith were homicidal, wouldn't he have hit Austin right then?" I asked. "Why wait until that evening to kill?"

"He probably didn't mean to have it end in violence, but he admits he had too much to drink that evening. Maybe he merely intended to make Austin back down. Or maybe he'd heard about the dinner party and thought he'd get even by ransacking the house while Austin and Eleanor were out."

"Have you considered that the killer might have been a real burglar who read about the dinner in the social columns, thought the house would be empty and then panicked when Austin surprised him?"

"Not likely. There were no signs of forcible entry and over $800 was left in the open safe. Besides, we found his half-finished drink and a fresh one, untouched, which he'd poured for a visitor. It had to be someone he knew and wasn't afraid of. Not that Austin ever had enough sense to be afraid of anybody. He could be rather thick at times."

Mal suddenly remembered that I'd once been engaged to Austin, for he said, "Sorry, Anne. I didn't mean to speak ill of the dead, but after all, you were the one who broke it off back then. You must have seen that side of him."

I nodded. "He was always too defensive about his own feelings of inferiority to consider what others felt. He thought we patronized him to his face and laughed at him behind his back. Ever since high school, he felt he had to show us all."

"And he did, didn't he?" Mal said wryly. "When you threw him over for Gordon, he married Eleanor on the rebound before the Kilpatricks had been in town long enough to know that Austin Whitley wasn't exactly one of Tyson-

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ville's exclusive Four Hundred."

"You're still a snob about Austin, aren't you?" I asked.

"If you mean could any of our crowd ever understand what you saw in him, yes! At least you woke up in time. And he didn't do too badly. His wife's money built that little plant he'd started into a million-dollar industry."

"He could have succeeded without her money if he'd had more faith in himself and hadn't been so worried about impressing 'our crowd' as you call it," I said coldly. "But I didn't come to rake over old ashes; I'm concerned about this Smith man."

Mal frowned at that, but he continued: "Fred Thomas was tending bar at the Inn and remembers serving Smith, but you know how crowded the Inn is on Wednesday nights. No one recalls seeing him there after 6:30 and Austin was killed between 7 and 8:30. Smith says he went home to sleep it off, but again, no verification."

"Didn't the paper say his landlady was partially deaf? He could have gone to his rooms without her hearing."

"*Could* have, but did he? Look, Anne, I don't know what your interest is, and I'll admit Jeff Smith seems like a decent young man—one of us, in fact—but what choice do I have? Right now, there're a dozen people who heard him threaten Austin and not a single witness to prove he didn't carry out those threats."

I took a deep breath and swallowed past the cold lump in my throat. "Yes there is. He was with me." I could feel the blood draining from my face and for a moment, I thought I would faint.

Mal was incredulous. "With *you*?"

I nodded miserably. "I'm sure they'll remember me at the Inn. That's Daisy's night off and I'd rather dine out than cook for myself. It was crowded, but I noticed Jeff Smith. When he left around 7, I followed and picked him up outside. He was with me until after midnight."

Mal stared at me, trying to reconcile those words with my ice-maiden image. So far as he or the town knew, I was chaste and inviolate, and except for Austin and Gordon, the two I'd been properly engaged to, no man had ever touched me. I knew Mal was remembering a long-ago dance at the country club when I'd slapped his face simply because he'd tried to kiss me on the patio, and now I was admitting *this*!

"Autumn has always been a miserable season," I said, choosing my words carefully. "The end of

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summer, the beginning of winter, the time I would have married Gordon if he hadn't been killed in that car wreck. I've been discreet. Don't look at me like that, Mal! I'm not an iceberg, no matter what this town may think! Can you understand?"

"Sure, Anne," he said uneasily; but I knew he didn't.

"Smith seemed safe. Through the grapevine, I'd heard about his fight with Austin and I thought he'd be leaving town. As you said, he appeared decent and honorable."

"More than I gave him credit for," Mal agreed. "Of course he must have realized no one would believe him if you denied the truth, so why drag you in and be branded a consummate liar? He probably figured a deaf landlady was as good a risk as—as—"

"—As accusing the frozen, irreproachable Miss Tyson?" I suggested bitterly.

"Now you mustn't blame yourself, Anne," Mal said pompously. "Smith's only lived here a few months. He couldn't know that Tysons stand for integrity at whatever cost." He frowned as he thought of the cost and I could almost see his outraged propriety struggle for a way to protect me from scandal.

"We'll want a signed statement, of course, but you can make it as terse as you like. Just the simple fact that you and Smith left the Inn at 7 and were together until . . . well, let's just leave it that you were together continuously from 7 till 8:30, the time period relevant to the murder. I'll talk to Sam Peters, get him to soft-pedal it in the paper. There may be a little gossip, but don't worry, Anne. You're loved and respected in Tysonville. The people who count will remember Gordon and they'll understand."

"I'm not worried about that aspect of my reputation," I said, privately amused by his prudery, "but thanks, anyhow."

After a steno had taken my statement and I'd signed it, I asked if I could see Smith. Mal didn't like it, but he agreed to have him sent over from the jail, next door.

Jeff Smith entered Mal's office warily, a homely young man, but with an open, good-natured face and intelligent blue eyes. "They say a witness has shown up for me," he said to Mal. Then he saw me and his eyes narrowed. "Miss Tyson!"

"It's all right," I assured him. "I've told the district attorney about my picking you up last Wednesday and how we spent the evening together. It was mistaken

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chivalry not to have told him yourself."

Smith studied me a long moment and then he turned to Mal. "Would you have believed me?"

"Frankly, no," Mal said, "but at least I'd have mentioned it to Miss Tyson and she'd have told me the truth. You could have spared yourself three days in jail."

"Truth is an odd variable in this town," Smith said wryly. "I tell you I didn't kill Whitley and you clap me in jail. Miss Tyson says I didn't and you let me go. I take it I *am* free to go?"

"Now see here!" said Mal, getting angry. "You don't seem to appreciate how much it's cost her to speak up for you. Yes, you're free to go. The sooner you leave town, the better, as far as I'm concerned. Just remember that Miss Tyson has to go on living here."

"Oh, I *do* appreciate Miss Tyson's generosity," Smith said grimly. "And don't worry. No detail of our evening together shall ever pass my lips. Give me a half-hour to pack and I'll be on the first plane out."

Over Mal's protests, I offered to drive Smith to the airport and he was silent as we drove through town. Even after he'd collected his things at the boardinghouse, he didn't speak until we'd nearly reached the airport, although I'd felt his eyes appraising me. He was so young. Did he feel humiliated at being linked with a woman ten years older?

"You're quite a lady, Miss Tyson," he said at last. "I can't help wondering what fires are smoldering under that beautiful, icy surface. It's enough to make me wish I'd really been with you Wednesday night. And so clever, too. Reid's probably too thunderstruck by your girlish confession to realize it gives *you* an alibi as well. Why did you kill Whitley?"

I kept my eyes on the highway and didn't answer.

"Of course, to know Whitley was not to love him," Smith mused. "Rumor has it that you were engaged to him once, but that was fifteen years ago. Why kill him now? Unless—of course! When they found him, his safe was open! What did you take away, Miss Tyson? Old love letters? A signed confession that you'd once jaywalked?"

"Photographs," I said as I parked near the main air terminal behind a windbreak of evergreens. "Five very explicit snapshots which he'd taken of me in our motel room four years ago."

Suddenly, the need to explain to him was irresistible. I cut the motor and twisted in the seat to face

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him. "The only unselfish act in Austin Whitley's entire life was to let me be the one to break our engagement when he decided Eleanor's money could help him more than my social ties. Out of pride, I immediately accepted someone who'd loved me since childhood. Gordon was a gentle, thoughtful, thoroughly decent man—everything Austin wasn't—and when he was killed just before our wedding, my tears were from sheer relief that he would never know I'd used him just as shabbily as Austin used Eleanor.

"After that, everyone thought Gordon's death had chilled my capacity to love. I was so ashamed of my actions I almost believed it myself. I truly thought I *was* frigid." My laugh was bitter.

"It took eleven years to discover that the fires Austin had ignited in me weren't frozen—just banked. We ran into each other accidentally in New York four years ago and everything blazed up again between us. The intensity of our passion was such that I asked for nothing, expected nothing, except that he let me love him. It was his discretion which kept our affair secret, not mine. I was totally shameless with him. For over a year, he only had to lift his phone for me to meet him wherever and whenever he wished. It was as if all my moral standards were numbed.

"But gradually, I began feeling guilty about Eleanor and I flew to Europe to try and get my emotions under control. Austin let me stay a month and then mailed one of those snapshots to my hotel. On the back, he'd written, 'I have four other poses which reveal even more of your charms. Remember? If you aren't back in a week, I'll paper the town with them.' I probably would have come back on my own; but after that, I loathed him."

"Yet being the proper Miss Tyson of Tysonville, you stood for it?"

"*Proper!* Can you still think I care about petty propriety? Those pictures meant nothing! What shamed me was knowing I'd loved someone devoid of personal honor—someone so totally ignoble that he could threaten to dirty me without caring how that betrayal would reflect on him! I wouldn't have minded a scandal about my morals, but no Tyson has ever been called a fool. Does that make any sense to you?"

"In a funny way, it does," said Smith, dropping his sarcasm. "What finally tipped the scales?"

"He'd left me alone for nearly a year and I'd begun to think I was free, but that fight with you

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opened up all the old wounds. You see, I symbolized the town's inner circle for him—the group that 'knew him when' and would never be impressed with how much money he made or how much respect he commanded in the business world outside Tysonville. Whenever anyone snubbed him or dropped an innuendo about the days when his mother was a promiscuous waitress and his father a drunken dirt farmer, he would take his revenge out on me. Your obvious breeding galled him and some of the epithets you threw at Austin were labels he'd been trying to live down all his life.

"He telephoned Wednesday afternoon and told me to come at 7:30. I found him half drunk and raving that he didn't need Eleanor anymore; that he was going to divorce her and marry me! Then he ordered me to take off my clothes. When I resisted, he slapped me and opened the safe and waved those pictures in my face. I tried to throw them in the fire, but he hit me again and fanned them out on his desk and started mouthing such obscene remarks that I couldn't bear another moment! Suddenly, the poker was in my hand and I—well, I found myself—"

Smith drew me to him and held me tightly until the trembling stopped. "The first week I arrived here," he murmured, "someone pointed you out and told me how you never again looked at another man after your fiancé died. You're almost a legend, know that? And I kept hearing about the sterling Tyson virtues—generations of disgustingly honest mayors, judges, you-name-its, ending in a beautiful vestal virgin who worshiped at the altar of family pride. Yet today, you tossed it all in the mud because your cock-eyed sense of honor couldn't let a stranger take the blame for a murder you committed."

"Not a stranger." I pulled away and smiled at him shakily. "Not after your fight with Austin. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

"I might have known you'd believe something as corny as that," he grinned. Opening the car door, he hesitated, then leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Thanks, friend," he said; and as he walked away toward the door of the air terminal, I felt something loosen inside—like a long-frozen stream thawing in spring sunlight.

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Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.
Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner

I was sipping on my first cup of coffee of the morning and wondering if the low, gray clouds over the Berkshire foothills meant snow when a gray-green car with the word "Sheriff" in large yellow letters on its side eased to a stop at my dead-end road. Lande Hale walked stolidly toward the house, his brown uniform coat bulging from the effects of his side-holstered .38 and a generous belly. His Smokey Bear hat tilted rakishly forward, and the lower half of his plump but handsome face appeared a dull gray. Lande's five o'clock shadow started right after the razor sliced off a whisker.

"Mornin', Randy," Lande said as I opened the door. "Looks like snow. Woolly bear fur is specially thick, so they're predictin' a lot." Lande glanced skyward as though he might see his predictions come true. Inside, he peeled off his leather gloves, unbuttoned his coat, and hitched up his pants over a short, squat frame.

I handed him a cup of coffee and Lande sat at the long table in the kitchen-livingroom, took a sip, and fished out a long, thin cigar from his shirt. The first puff roiled

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out of his mouth and skidded to a halt as a perfect smoke circle. Whatever Lande had come to say wasn't far off. It took concentration to make a perfect circle and Lande must have been thinking hard.

"Got a really queer case I'm workin' on, Randy. Perplexin' kind of case. Thought you might like to hear about it." That was Lande's way of asking for help. I nodded.

"First off, got a fella who murdered his wife," Lande began without any preliminaries. I knew from that the case must be bothering him. "Know he murdered her because he told me . . ." Lande's hand came up to stifle my questions. "Not in so many words. But from the whole way he acted. I *know* he did it. An' he knows I know. Been around long enough to figure that out."

I didn't doubt that Lande was probably right. He had been sheriff of Renselville County for some thirty years and he was cop smart. His intelligence wasn't intellectual or speculative, but intuitive and pragmatic. Sometimes Lande had been wrong about a purely intuitive conclusion, but never *far* wrong.

"Second off, this fella—he's named Holland Leroy—stands to gain some $300,000 worth of life insurance. An' he took out these insurance policies just some five months ago." Lande sucked on a corner tooth as he lightly dipped off a long ash from his cigar. "Leroy told me about this insurance first thing. Said plain out he didn't

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have anythin' to hide and knew we'd find out anyway, so he told me right off."

Motive enough, I thought. People had killed for far less.

"Third off is the queeriest part. His wife died just four days ago, at home. Neighbors who dropped by shortly before said she was havin' convulsions and called ol' Doc Peterjohn over there in Amytown. By the time Doc got there she was dead."

"Well, what did she die of?" I asked impatiently. Lande looked at me, surprised. He had his own pace and had always refused to be rushed.

"Comin' to that, an' it's a part I don't understand fully. But it gets a mite complicated from here on out, Randy. Got a minute or two?"

Lande looked at me expectantly. If I wanted out, or didn't have time to help on this case, now was when I was expected to say so. I nodded again.

"Well, we know from neighbors that Grace Leroy—that's *her* name, or was—was drinkin' somethin' like half a gallon or so of that bottled water a day. Maybe even more. Neighbors told me that, and so did Tim Fields who runs the general store in Amytown."

I wondered then if Lande knew every storekeeper, doctor, and farmer in the county.

"Grace Leroy, it appears, claimed ordin'ry well water was contaminated. So she drank only from those plastic store-bought jugs of water. She was one of those ecology persons." Lande said the last words with a puzzled air, as though ecology was an inexplicable state of being.

I must have looked as confused as I was. That was a lot of water to drink a day, but I didn't see how it tied in with a murder. Lande blew out a stream of smoke before he continued.

"The county coroner got ahold of her. He claims that Grace Leroy died of somethin' called 'Strickland's Syndrome.' "

I guess Lande had been building to this punch line because a shy grin of satisfaction widened his mouth as he saw my surprise. The county coroner, George Strickland, was a prissy little man, short-tempered and curt.

Lande picked up. "Strickland says he never saw anythin' like Grace Leroy before. I guess he meant cause of death, but with Strickland you can never be sure. Anyway, he named it Strickland's Syndrome to get in first licks in case it's a new disease or somethin'. He's very excited about findin' a new way people die. Says

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it'll make his name famous. Came out of that autopsy room happy as a groundhog in a lettuce patch." The disgust in Lande's voice was plain.

"Well, what actually killed Grace Leroy?" I asked again, hoping to push Lande's pace a bit. This time he responded.

"Strickland told me the exact cause was . . ." Lande heaved his bulk to one side and got out a black notebook from his hip pocket. He wet a finger and thumbed to a page, ". . . pernicious systemic dehydration." Lande looked from his notebook to me. "All boiled down to plain language, Randy, it means she died of thirst."

The idea was so outrageous I wasn't even shocked. I shook my head. "Lande, nobody dies of *thirst*. Besides, you just said she was drinking a few quarts of water a day . . ."

"Maybe even more," Lande interjected.

"Strickland's headed for the funny farm. He's groping for fame with this one," were the only comments that came to mind.

Lande grunted, as though conceding a point to Strickland. "Might be. But he called in some top pathologists from Albany State Medical College and they took a look. Heard that Grace Leroy was bloated up somethin' awful from all that water she was drinkin'. But, from what they tell me, her inside organs looked like, or acted like—I forget which—they were dried out."

Lande paused and I thought I caught a note of regret in his eyes that betrayed more personal involvement with this case than usual. I must have looked skeptical because Lande added: "Those doctors used microscopes and stuff like that to prove what they said." Lande waved his cigar in a loose circle to show that the mysteries of lab equipment properly belonged to the occult when compared to the tangible world of hard evidence like bullets, weapons, or footprints.

I shook my head again. "The water was poisoned for sure," I concluded. "No one just dies of thirst."

Lande's coffee cup tinkled as he sipped again. "Course I did think of poison," he said flatly. "They tested that bottled water for everythin'. Then those doctors at Albany State fed some to mice, right off. They're still as frisky as ever, and that after three days. That water tests out as pure and distilled. Leastways those experts tell me so." Lande let out another puff. "Somethin' tells me they're right, too."

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"You sure you got a sample of the water she was really drinking? Holland Leroy might have changed it, you know."

Lande didn't exactly give me a look of disgust, but the forced patience in his tone indicated it was an unneeded question.

"I got there shortly after Grace Leroy was found. Tim's as gossipy a storekeeper as you'll find. He told me right off she was drinkin' a lot of that bottled water, an' I took a jug direct from her refrigerator. No one, exactly, knows I did take it, 'cept me and now you. Strickland and the other docs don't care one whit or t'other."

I summed up what Lande had told me. "So you've got a woman that died of thirst after drinking a few quarts of water a day, a husband who's going to profit by $300,000 and practically admits to the killing, but not a sign of what really caused her death. Right?"

"Thought you might have a few ideas," Lande said, conceding defeat.

This wasn't the first time Lande had told me about a case. I had come to Stetville from the city, where I knew enough medicine, chemistry, physics and other sciences to be a highly paid technical computer programmer. Now, I was content to live in this old farmhouse on a dead-end road at the foothills of the Berkshires, enjoying a rural peace no urbanite can comprehend. My old firm gave me as much free-lance work as I wanted to fit between putting up birdhouses, trying to get the bass to hatch, improving an amateur weather station, and other sundry rural delights. I met Lande and had given him a hand on cases that had a technical or scientific facet to them.

"What's Leroy like?" I asked.

"He's a chemistry professor at Berkshire University and, from what I learned, does some of that private research at his school. As far as what he's like, I thought you might like to see for yourself. Matter of fact, I told Leroy that I'd be by sometime this mornin' to see him again. Dropped by here first, in case you'd want to come."

I don't know what stratagem Lande would have used to get me to go with him if I had been busy. Underneath his casual manner he had a steel-like determination. Not having a case wrapped up was, to Lande, like an itch in the back just where it can't be scratched.

It was a twenty-mile drive to Leroy's house, over a country road that wound its way first through the Berkshire Hills and then into a valley. The trees were stark, and the recently fallen

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leaves lay thick on the ground. The gray clouds seemed lower when Lande pulled up to a split-level ranch-type house. A dozen manicured shrubs grew close to the windows and doorway. The lawn was immaculate, neatly trimmed and without one stray fallen leaf to mar its green monotony.

A pull chain hung next to a heavy wooden door with artificial adz marks over it and a semicircle of small glass panes. Lande ignored the pull chain and knocked against the thick wood as though it were Leroy himself.

The door opened slowly and a tall man in a woolen shirt and pressed pants peered at us curiously through thick lenses, as though we were specimens being examined through binoculars or a microscope. Leroy was about 44, with a thick shock of black hair and a good build. Nothing had gone to fat. A kind of slow, impish grin spread across his long, rugged face when he saw Lande. He opened the door wider.

"Sheriff Hale. So come in and bring your friend." Leroy's voice was a rich, modulated baritone but it held a note of amused tolerance or muted sarcasm. I felt my hackles rising.

At introductions, Leroy made a slight, stiff bow in my direction, as though squaring off for a feudal duel. His whole attitude was combative. He was expecting a fight, even welcoming one, and he didn't hold much doubt that he'd win.

"Questions, Sheriff Hale? More questions? I thought we had settled all that. But ask if you will. I'm at your service." Leroy spoke with theatrical resignation, phony as hell. I began to get an eerie feeling about the man. Somehow he managed to stare completely through us, as though focusing on our backbones. It was like meeting an automaton.

The livingroom was next to a foyer, where we were, but Leroy carefully herded us to the kitchen. "I'm just preparing lunch," he explained, although I didn't see much evidence of a lunch around.

"Some beer for you, Sheriff? For you?" Leroy stared at me, turning his entire head as though his eyes were fixed in their sockets. That look contained a kind of wild, animal viciousness. Both Lande and I shook our heads to decline the offer.

Leroy said nothing, then patted the refrigerator door and opened it. He pushed aside two plastic jugs of water with a flourish and took out a six-pack of beer from behind them. "Poor Grace, she loved her kitchen, especially this

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new refrigerator. We had just got it before . . . her death," Leroy said in the mellow, confidential tones undertakers use for third cousins twice removed.

He broke off a can of beer from the six. "Sure?" he asked, pointing to the remaining cans. Lande and I both shook our heads again. With a sigh, Leroy put back the beer and again patted the refrigerator.

It was odd, but then Leroy was odder. I guessed that he was holding onto sanity by a thin edge. He was either crazy or close to it—but that didn't stop his intelligence from working.

"Well, then," Leroy said, as though summing up an entire conversation. "Questions, Sheriff." It was a royal command.

"Just one, Mr. Leroy . . ." I interjected.

"Ah. *Doctor* Leroy, if you don't mind. Ph.D. in chemistry, organic chemistry," Leroy corrected gently.

"Well, then, Dr. Leroy, I just wondered if your private research is being funded by the university, the government, or what?"

I hit a nerve, all right, although he must have been expecting a question as logical as that one. He became almost apoplectic. "There exists quite a gap between the imagination of petty bureaucrats and that of true researchers," he said testily. "My projects were being funded by both the university and the federal government, half and half. I have recently learned that these funds, for all practical purposes, will be cut." His face became a stern mask of indignation. "They have no appreciation of my work," he added.

"However, the insurance money from your wife's death will fill the gap, I presume?"

Lande grimaced in annoyance. I knew he preferred to be less direct, but I felt that a quick, straight approach might get more information. Playing with him wouldn't, for sure.

Strangely, Leroy cooled immediately. Wherever his control came from, it was strong. "You may, if you wish, insinuate anything. As a matter of fact, I took out those policies at Grace's request months before I discovered that those . . ." as Leroy groped for a word his face became flushed, ". . . *Neanderthals* decided to cut my funds."

Strikeout for Leroy; research programs aren't generally chopped overnight, but phased out over months. Leroy had probably had plenty of warning and therefore plenty of motive. There was no way to check if Grace Leroy actually suggested those policies or

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not, but safe money said she didn't.

Leroy had warmed up to the lecture route and I knew more questions would be futile. I had come primarily to get an idea of the man and I had. I gave Lande a nod and we turned to go.

Leroy was genuinely surprised and, I think, disappointed. "So soon?" he asked imperiously. "But perhaps you'd care to look over some results I've published," he said, thrusting a few pamphlets into my hand. Where they came from I don't know. He probably had them stashed all over the house for such occasions.

I stuffed them idly into my jacket pocket. It's common for researchers to have reprints made of articles published in scientific journals. They were invariably, except to specialists, highly technical and rather dull.

"Any time," Leroy called out as we walked to the car. It sounded like a jeer.

Lande was disappointed and so was I; in and out in about ten minutes, with not a fact in hand. We hardly spoke a word during the drive to my house. The ground looked sere and naked under the low gray skies; not a flake of snow in sight.

I built a fire in my Franklin stove and the flames added a note of cheeriness I needed. I had little doubt that Leroy had killed his wife. Just why, I don't know; perhaps his attitude, perhaps the fact that his motive was so plain and that he no more grieved for his wife than I would for a dead mouse.

I sat in my rocking chair and sipped on a bourbon and soda while looking at the pond below the house. I remembered those pamphlets that Leroy had practically forced on me, so I got them from my jacket, more for something to do than for interest.

The first pamphlet bore the title: *Tracing the Function of Centrioles during Mitosis with Deuterium.* I knew from the title that his research dealt with cells, and was able to follow it pretty well. Leroy seemed to know his field. The presentation was clear and articulate and his conclusions surprisingly ingenuous. I read all three of his pamphlets and sipped again on the bourbon.

Something had begun to nag me, and all that afternoon it nagged harder as I fixed some of the infinity of small ills that beset an old house. I might never have discovered what that nagging worry was except for the dream I had that night.

It was about a man who killed his wife and stashed her behind a

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newly-built brick wall in his cellar. A detective came to investigate the disappearance. The man led the detective to the cellar and then boasted of the fine construction of the brick wall, tapping it for emphasis. A cat's yowl issued from behind the wall, a house cat that had disappeared with the woman. The detective had the wall opened up, and sent the man to the gallows.

Edgar Allen Poe's story *The Black Cat;* a case of a man taunting fate and defeating himself.

I awoke fretful and anxious. The dream had been vivid and something in it seared my mind. No doubt it concerned the case Lande was on, but what was my unconscious trying to tell me? I didn't have a guess.

Later in the morning I gave up on a computer program with which I was doodling. Later in the afternoon I put down the book I had been trying to read and sat looking at my pond, the gray clouds even darker than the day before.

Dreams often re-create situations, I told myself. My thoughts, as they had a dozen times that day, drifted back to yesterday. Then an idea, impalpable and shadowy, slowly materialized from the haze of impressions and recollections.

There had been a parallel situation. Leroy had led us to the kitchen because he was fixing lunch—but no lunch. He had made a fuss over the refrigerator. He had patted it, opened it, and shoved aside those plastic water bottles for the beer. Yet, if he drank beer regularly, why was the only six-pack there full? And why was it behind the water bottles? Water bottles. Water.

An electric shock ran through me and I jerked up in my chair. Something I had read in Leroy's pamphlets had just fused with those jugs of water—an idea of how he had killed his wife. I paced the room, shaking my head at the improbability of it all, wanting to be wrong. Yet the idea fit every fact, including why Grace Leroy could die of thirst after drinking a few quarts of water daily. I calmed down and stared at the pond again, stunned. If the idea was true, Leroy had committed one of the most fiendishly premeditated murders one could imagine. I hoped I was wrong. It wasn't a pleasant way to die.

The idea was easy to test. I called Lande and asked if he'd bring over the jug he snitched from the Leroy household. Lande said, "Yes," but hoped it was worth postponing a chicken coop he was building. I hoped so too.

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When Lande arrived he was dressed in his sheriff's uniform. I knew damn well he'd been fixing a chicken coop in old clothes; but on official business Lande dressed officially. It was a quirk I admired.

He set the half-empty jug on the table with a thump. "Wasn't full when I got it. Then there was the analysis and those mice. Hope this'll do." He looked at me steadily, no curiosity showing.

I had everything ready on the table: an empty quart bottle, a kitchen scale once used to weigh flour and sugar and still accurate to a quarter of an ounce. "It'll be just a minute," I mumbled as I filled the quart bottle with tap water and set it on the scale.

"You just go ahead," Lande reassured me. "Those chickens can wait a time."

The large dial of the scale rolled to two pounds, fourteen ounces. "Look at this, Lande," I said.

Lande rose halfway from the bench and peered at the scale. "Bottle of water weighs about . . ." Lande looked skyward as though recollecting an important fact, ". . . two pounds, fourteen ounces. Never knew that." He fished out a long cigar and lit up.

"I'll explain in a minute, Lande," I said, emptying out the water from the bottle. Then, with a funnel, I filled it with water from the plastic jug and put the bottle on the scale. Whatever number the scale read I'd soon know if my idea was correct.

The dial pointed to three pounds three ounces. Lande half rose again, infected with my interest, and scrutinized the scale. I looked at him triumphantly. I was right.

"Reads five ounces more," Lande said. "Doesn't seem so important."

"It means that Leroy killed his wife," I retorted. "And one of the cleverest murders I've ever heard of."

"Just hope your proof is worth a chicken coop," Lande said with a grunt. He knew me well enough to know I wasn't kidding.

"You can pick him up now. That worth a chicken coop?" I asked.

"Maybe you could explain all this, Randy. That scale don't look all that accurate to me. Whatever difference does a few ounces make between these two bottles of water anyway?"

"Lande," I began, "Leroy gave me some pamphlets about his research yesterday. He was experimenting with deuterium. Deuterium is also known as heavy water."

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Lande glanced at the scale. "And you're going to tell me it's called heavy water because it's heavier than regular water, right?"

"Right. It was used to help make atomic bombs, actually. But researchers use it too. I won't go into why."

"And what's in that jug is this here heavy water. Now, supposin' you explain just how it killed Grace Leroy."

"First of all, it's poison."

Lande shook his head wearily, and I knew he was thinking of a courtroom where the pathologists recited the results of their toxicological examinations.

"But not a regular kind of poison," I added quickly. "Not the kind that any chemical test would show. In fact, no chemical test *could* show it's poison. Leroy knows that."

Lande spewed out another stream of smoke, still doubtful.

"Look, water—regular water—is made from hydrogen and oxygen. Two hydrogen atoms for every oxygen atom. That's why it's called H_2O."

Lande nodded patiently.

"To make it simple, there are different kinds of hydrogen. There's one kind that's heavier than the other because of something called a neutron added to the hydrogen nucleus. When water is made from this kind of hydrogen it's heavier and is called heavy water."

"And this kind is poison?" Lande asked.

"The body can't use it, Lande. There's no *chemical* difference, so body cells can't tell the difference and try to use it, but it's like eating grass when you're hungry. Your belly will be full but you'll starve to death. You can drink all the heavy water you want, but essentially you'll die of thirst."

Lande considered that for a while. "Then how come we're alive if we're drinkin' all this heavy water?"

"We don't. It's rare. It has to be bought from chemical supply houses. It costs, I'd guess, about $80 a quart."

Lande could appreciate that more than anything else. He stared at the plastic jug. "You mean what was in that jug cost in the neighborhood of $320?"

I nodded. Leroy had just become more of a culprit in Lande's eyes than before. Then another wave of doubt crossed his face.

"Then how come those mice didn't die?" he asked.

"Because you have to drink enough of it over a long enough time. Cells in the body take in water steadily. If they only get

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heavy water, they take that in. I'd say Leroy started substituting heavy water in his wife's jugs about a week and a half ago."

"Will this hold up in court, Randy?" Lande was chewing on his cigar now, not lighting it. He was still worried.

"It'll hold. You get that body exhumed. There are technical ways to spot heavy water, a mass spectrometer is one of them. Strickland and the other pathologists were looking for *chemical* poisons. They never would have thought of trying to test for heavy water."

Then another thought hit me—the dream; it had more significance than I thought. I recalled Leroy patting the refrigerator, but all I told Lande was: "As soon as you hit Leroy with this, he'll break. He wants to be caught. He thought heavy water was the cleverest way in the world to kill a person—and maybe it was. But he'll break, now that his secret's known."

Lande rose. "I guess it's worth a chicken coop after all."

Something else had been bothering me about this case, something concerning Lande. "How come you seem to be so intent on catching Leroy?" I asked. "You're more involved than you usually are."

Lande looked at me appreciatively. "Grace Leroy was a second cousin to Alice." I remembered that Alice was Lande's wife. "Used to dangle her on my knee. We grew apart over the years, specially after she married Leroy. He knew we were kin but never once visited. I loved that little girl. Hated to see her killed."

Lande snapped on his Smokey Bear hat, embarrassed at becoming so personal. I walked him to the door. "Guess I'll pick up Leroy now. Never did like him," Lande added as he looked approvingly at the sky outside.

A thin layer of snow covered the ground. More flakes descended swiftly, swirling in clumps when they were picked up by a soft breeze. You could see Lande's tracks plainly leading from my door to his sheriff's car.

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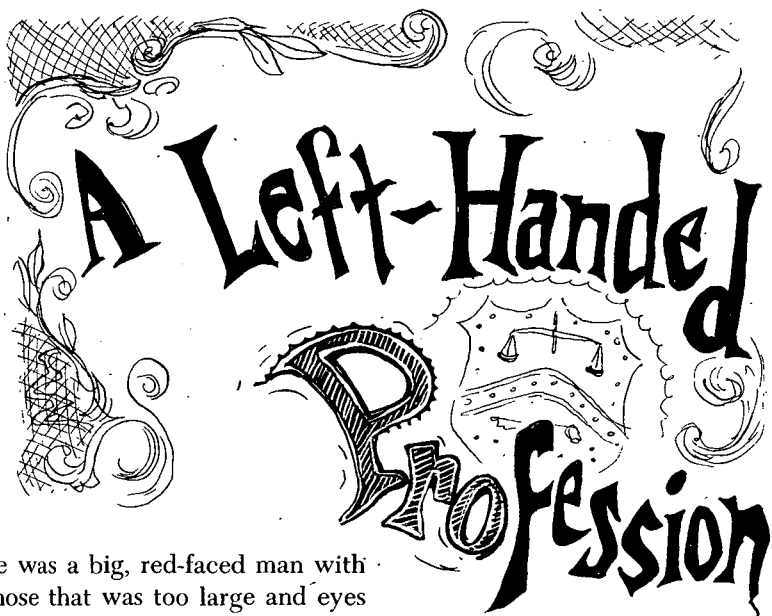
A few strategic modifications may increase one's worth considerably.



He was a big, red-faced man with a nose that was too large and eyes that were too small, and I never heard a grown man whine so much. He sat at the bar, surrounded by flunkies, and didn't shut up for a moment. To hear him tell it, and no one in the lounge of the Buena Vista Casino heard much else that afternoon, he hadn't made a nickel's profit in years. Taxes had left him with nothing.

He might have convinced the Internal Revenue Service, but he didn't convince me. His English leather shoes, hand-tailored suit and wafer-thin wristwatch all said he was a liar. So did the large diamond he wore on the little finger of his right hand—the hand he gestured with—and the thick roll of currency he carried.

From where I sat with my back

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to the wall, I had a good view of both the bar and the entrance. I watched Benny Krotz nervously make his way across the casino floor, past the crap tables, blackjack dealers and roulette wheels. He paused in the entrance for a moment, blinking his eyes rapidly to adjust them to the reduced illumination. When he spotted me, he came over and dropped lightly into the seat beside me. Benny was a gambler who believed in flying saucers and luck, but he'd never seen either one. A loser if I'd ever seen one, not that my white hair and conservative clothes made me look like a world-beater.

I nodded toward the bigmouth at the bar. "Is that the mark?" I asked.

Benny hesitated, afraid of giving away the only thing he had to sell. Finally he acknowledged, "Yeah, that's the guy. How'd ya make him so fast?" His expression was glum.

"I'd have to be deaf, blind and have a cold to miss him," I said quietly.

"A cold?"

"Even if I couldn't hear him or see him, his smell would give him away." I allowed myself a brief smile. "He smells like money."

Benny brightened. "He looks good to ya, huh?"

"He looks almost perfect. He's

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a liar who lives well, so he's probably dishonest and greedy. There's no better target for a con game. There's only one trouble."

"One trouble?" Benny echoed.

"Uh-huh—this town is crawling with hustlers. If I can spot that guy in less time than it takes to light a cigarette, others have done it, too. He's probably been propositioned more times than the chorus line at Radio City Music Hall. And, considering the type of person he is, he's probably already fallen for more than one con game and is extra cautious now. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Benny admitted. "That's right. He's been burned."

"Badly?"

"Yeah, pretty bad. He's been taken in card games, crap games and a bunch o' con games, already."

I finished my drink and signaled for the waitress. When she had taken our order and left, I turned back to Benny. "What kind of con games?" I asked.

"All the usual—phony stock, underwater real estate, cheap stolen goods that turned out to be perfectly legitimate factory rejects. And Red Harris took him for twenty thousand about six months ago with a counterfeit money swindle. Red gave him fifty brand-new twenties, telling him they were samples of the stuff he had for sale. He let him try them out all over town, then sold him a wrapped-up telephone book and made a nineteen-grand profit."

I laughed and looked over to where the mark was sitting. "That must have hurt his pride," I said. "How about his wallet? What kind of shape is that in?"

"Good shape. Very good shape. That's Big Jim Thompson, the drilling contractor. He has about half a hundred rigs working throughout the Southwest, and he gets paid whether they hit anything or not."

"That's fine," I said, smiling again. "It would ruin my Robin Hood image to take money from a poor man."

The waitress brought our drinks and I paid for them while Benny fumbled politely in his empty pockets. Because my money clip was already out, I removed three $100 bills and passed them to Benny. "For your help," I said.

"You're satisfied with him?" Benny asked, snatching up the money. He couldn't conceal his surprise. "He's gonna be mighty cautious."

I shrugged. "I don't think that will be a problem. Can you introduce us?"

"Yeah, sure." Benny started to push his chair back. "What's your

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name? For the introduction?"

Benny had been recommended to me as a source of information. Since he was in the business of selling what he knew about people, I hadn't given him any more about me than he needed to know, which was nothing. I had been in the game too long to make that kind of mistake. Now I gave him a name. "William Henk," I said, but I didn't move to get up. "There's no hurry, Benny. Finish your drink, then we'll go over."

Benny could have had ten more drinks; it wouldn't have mattered. Big Jim Thompson was firmly ensconced at the bar. He was still holding court over his followers when we walked over to them a few minutes later, and he gave every impression of being there for hours to come. He glanced contemptuously at Benny, then he noticed me and his small eyes narrowed.

"Mr. Thompson," Benny said, "my friend William Henk wants to meetcha."

Thompson swung around on his stool, but he didn't extend his hand, and I didn't offer mine. "Why?" he challenged.

"Because I've been hearing a lot about you," I said.

"What have you been hearing?"

"That you're a real sucker for a con game," I answered, and Benny looked as though someone had just kicked him in the stomach.

Thompson's face started to go from red to purple. "What business is it of yours?"

"I might have a deal for you."

"*Might* have?" Thompson snorted disdainfully.

"OK, *will* have. Tomorrow. Meet me here at this time and I'll tell you about it."

"What makes you think I'll be interested in any deal of yours?"

"It will give you a chance to get even for your losses. Maybe get a little ahead. You'd like that, right?"

"So why wait till tomorrow?"

I nodded pleasantly at all his friends. "The audience is too big, and I have someone waiting for me. There's no rush. This is no con game," I said, then turned on my heel and walked away. I could feel their eyes on me, but I didn't look back. I had sunk the hook into Thompson. Now I could reel him in—carefully.

I bought a stack of out-of-town newspapers, then drove back toward the hotel where I was staying. I made a lot of unnecessary turns to be sure I wasn't being followed and put the rented car in a lot a block away. I could hear the shower running when I

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opened the door of the suite, and my wife Margie's soft voice floated out to me. She was singing an old folk song, but she'd forgotten most of the words.

I slipped out of my suit coat, kicked off my shoes, and sprawled across the bed with the newspapers. I read all the crime news I can find. Doctors read medical journals; I study newspapers. Both of us are keeping abreast of the changes in our professions.

Margie came out of the bathroom wrapped in a yellow robe. Her long chestnut hair was freshly brushed and shiny. She sat on the edge of the bed and kissed me. "Anything new in the papers?" she asked.

I'd married Margie because she was beautiful and young, and made me feel young, too. Later I noticed I had received a bonus—no one ever looked at me when we were together.

"Not much," I answered. "A couple of bank robberies in New York City—amateurs; a jewel robbery in Miami that has the police excited; and the Los Angeles cops are still hunting for the four men who held up the armored car three days ago."

"Do you think they'll catch them?"

"Probably. Men who have to make their livings with guns in their fists will never win any prize for brains," I said.

Margie stood up and started to unpack more of our clothes. I stopped her. "Don't bother," I said. "We won't be here as long as I figured. I've found a live one."

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

"When it's over. I'm still working it out in my head."

The next afternoon, Thompson was waiting for me in the lounge of the Buena Vista Casino when I arrived. He was alone and seemed smaller. He was one of those people who needs an audience before he can come alive.

"What've ya got to sell?" he asked, bypassing all small-talk preliminaries.

"Counterfeit," I answered, handing him a single bill.

Thompson stood up without another word and headed for the entrance. I followed him across the casino floor, and into the coffee shop. There were a couple of customers at the counter, but that was all. Thompson went to the last booth along the wall and sat down, waving away a waitress who started toward him. I took the seat opposite his and waited.

He pulled a ten-power jeweler's loupe out of his pocket, screwed it into his right eye, and examined

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the $50 bill I had given him. I knew he was studying the portrait of Grant, the scrollwork along the borders, and the sharpness of the points on the treasury seal—and he was finding everything perfect.

"You must think I'm a real fool," he said with a nasty smile. "This ain't counterfeit."

"You don't think so, huh?" I handed him another $50 bill. "What about this?"

He was a little faster this time, but his verdict was the same. "It's real."

"And this one?"

A look, a feel, a snap. "Good as gold."

"Nope." I shook my head. "Counterfeit."

He pointed a blunt finger at the center of my chest. "Listen, punk, I know genuine money when I see it. Whatever you're planning ain't gonna work, so forget it."

"You can be sure of one thing."

"What's that?"

I gave him a nasty smile. "I won't try to sell you a twenty-thousand-dollar telephone book."

His jaw tightened.

"Instead," I continued, "I'm going to give you the chance of a lifetime. Those bills *are* counterfeit. In fact, these samples have one major flaw that the rest of my stock doesn't have."

I took the three bills out of his hand and lined them up on the table between us. Then I added three more fifties to the row. "Unlike genuine currency," I told him, "all six of these bills have the same serial numbers."

Thompson's eyes jerked back to the bills, and he snatched up two of them. He held them up to the light and studied them, frowning. After that he compared two more and sat staring at the six identical Federal Reserve notes.

"Do you still think they're real?" I taunted.

"I've never seen anything like this," he said in an awed tone. "These bills are perfect."

"*Almost* perfect," I corrected. "But I'll deliver brand-new, absolutely perfect bills."

He started to scoop up the money from the table, but I put my hand over his. "Where do you think you're going with that?" I asked.

He gestured toward the gaming tables. "Out into the casino to test some of this."

"Not without paying for it first. I don't give free samples, mister. I don't have to. I've got the best queer there is, and I get fifty cents on the dollar for *every* dollar. That three hundred will cost you one-fifty."

"That's pretty steep for counterfeit, isn't it?"

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"You said yourself, you've never seen anything like it. I've been in business for five years and not one bill has ever been questioned, let alone detected. It's not every day you get a chance to double your money."

Thompson gave me a hundred and fifty from the roll he carried, then took my six identical bills into the casino. I ordered a cup of coffee and a hamburger, and settled down to wait for him. I was drinking my second cup of coffee when he returned.

He looked a little stunned by his success. "Not one dealer so much as blinked an eye. I've had 'em look closer at good money," he said.

I didn't have to give him any more of my sales pitch. He was selling himself. I sat back and sipped my coffee.

He didn't keep me waiting long. "Tell ya what, I'll take twenty-five thousand worth."

I shook my head.

"That too much?" he asked.

"Too little. You've seen the last samples you ever will. From now on I sell nothing smaller than hundred-thousand-dollar lots."

He did some mental arithmetic. "That's fifty thousand to me, right?"

"No. The hundred thousand is what *you* pay. In exchange, I give you two hundred thousand in crisp, new tens, twenties and fifties. Each bill with a *different* serial number."

He didn't say anything right away. I gave him two full minutes to think about it, then slid out of the booth and stood up. "Hell, I thought you were big time," I said disdainfully, then started to walk away.

Thompson called me back, as I knew he would. He was as predictable as a fixed race. "OK," he said. "You've got a deal, but you better not be planning a rip-off."

"How can there be a rip-off? You're going to examine every bill before you pay me, and you can bring all the help you think you'll need. And I'm not worried about being hijacked by you because I'll tell some friends who it is I'll be doing business with. If anything happened to me, you wouldn't be hard to find."

"So we understand each other," he said. "OK, when can we complete the deal?"

"The sooner the better," I said. "The sooner the better."

Four hours later, Margie and I were on our way out of town with Thompson's hundred grand. We were in the rented car because I figured we'd better leave before there was any chance of Thompson getting wise to how I'd

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tricked him. I could return the car to the agency's office in L.A. or Frisco.

"You're really something," Margie said, hugging my arm while I drove. "When you bought the loot from the armored car robbery in Los Angeles, you paid ten cents on the dollar because all the money was new and the numbers had been recorded. You said it was so hot you'd be lucky to get fifteen or twenty cents on the dollar, and then only after you located the right buyer."

"That's what I thought until I met Thompson."

"Didn't he know the money was stolen?"

"No. He thought it was counterfeit. I showed him six perfect fifties, all with the same serial numbers." I told her what had happened in the coffee shop.

"Where did you get counterfeit money?" she demanded.

"I didn't. It was good. Part of the armored car loot, in fact."

"You must think I'm stupid," Margie said. "I know good money doesn't have the same serial numbers."

I stopped for a traffic light, then got the car rolling again after it changed. "It does if you take half a dozen consecutively numbered bills and erase the last digit."

Margie's mouth opened in surprise. "You can do that? You can erase the numbers?"

"Easier than you'd think, and without leaving a trace, either."

We rode in silence for a few minutes, then Margie said, "Why didn't you erase the first digit on all the bills? That way they'd all be good to spend and you'd have gotten one hundred cents on the dollar?" She was smart as well as beautiful.

"Because the risk of detection was very slight with only six bills, but some smart teller would surely have noticed if I'd tried to change the numbers on every bill. Then it would have been you and I back there, trying to explain where we got the money, instead of Big Jim Thompson."

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If one fully recognizes his adversaries he may find a means to justify the end.

A rubber ball; the mind; on playground duty the idea struck him, watching the kids bounce it. One side caves in, the other side bulges. So you can't forget, not really.

He saw his reflection in the cafeteria window.

Weird, after the things he did, to become a grade-school teacher. The fatigue jacket and jeans gave him a comfortable look, but that wasn't why he wore them. Money was the real reason.

The patches were ripped off, but a couple of rusty spots couldn't be washed out—blood. Not his either, but some poor guy's who may've had kids or not; kids like these, maybe.

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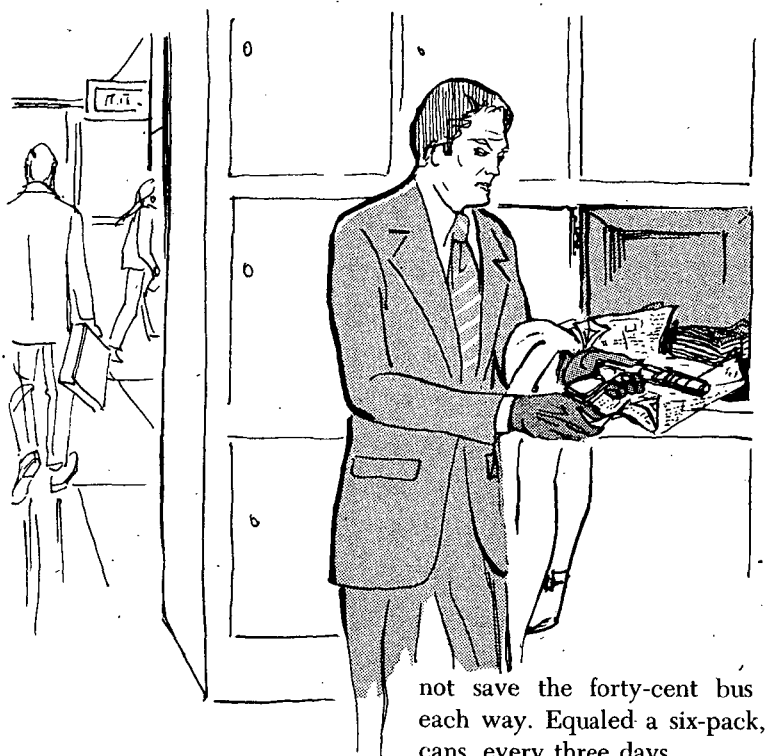
"Hey, Mr. Mason! A little help!"

He scooped up the ball and gave it a soft dropkick. The kids cheered. He took a bow. They laughed and gave the yeah-yeah wave.

Years of work, of sacrifice, for this, for these kids and others like them—was it worth it?

He let his neck sort of turtle-down into the drab warmth of the jacket, like in the old days, in the mountains where the wind was freezing. Made you feel safe.

It was four o'clock, an early spring day. He walked the three miles home. The car was shot again, and he had time, so why



not save the forty-cent bus fare each way. Equaled a six-pack, tall cans, every three days.

Walking this way, taking your time if you wished, seeing people and things up close, was interesting. Maybe if everybody did it

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there wouldn't be so much evil in the world. Kept the weight and the blood pressure down, too.

He came around the corner and spotted the apartment house. Old, beat, tough; when people heard he lived in such a neighborhood they shook their heads. He only laughed. What did they know about *tough*, what they saw on the tube? Neither he nor his wife had trouble. Punks sized him up fast.

A strange car was parked at the curb, a brown sedan of the mid-price range, sort you'd see but not remember.

He went up the two flights, letting the cooking odors narrow his field of vision. Something simple and hot, something sweet, and later maybe a beer or two.

"Charlie, we've got company," his wife Ann said as she opened the door to his knock.

The car out front? He forgot his stomach.

"Charlie Mason, howya doing?"

Over his wife's shoulder he recognized a face he hadn't seen in five years.

"It's been a long time," the visitor said.

"Col. Romero was telling me how you and he were in the Army together, Charlie," Ann said, taking his jacket.

Romero extended his hand.

Charlie gave it a squeeze and said, "Yeah, we did time in the same group. You were a major then."

"Five years, things happen. Like in any business, you move up. You should've stayed in, Charlie. By now you'd be captain at least, maybe major."

Or nothing, dead in an unmarked grave in an unknown country. Romero wasn't the type that just dropped in to talk about old times. He wanted something.

The last mission out of Austria over the border into Yugoslavia; Lake Bled; the monastery; it all came back. They debriefed you with drugs, but they couldn't block out everything. Five years later he still saw those old people in the boat, fishing. The lake was dark blue, very deep, and the old folks were out in the middle. Romero, just for fun—

He was saying something about Ann.

Charlie nodded, "Yeah, sure."

"Nice place you've got here. And I'll bet you're a fine teacher. Kids love you, right?"

Ann said, "He's been working with peewee football, too, in his spare time."

"Is that so?" Romero replied. "Well, Charlie was always a good team player."

"OK," Charlie said, "what's

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up? What brings you here now?"

"Charlie! The colonel's our guest!"

"That's all right, Ann," Romero said. "Your husband's surprised to see me. If I were in his place I'd be the same. Charlie, the old man wants to see you."

"The colonel's here?"

Romero grinned. "He's a general now."

Romero spoke about the weather, the city, about this and that as he drove.

Finally, Charlie said, "How'd you find me?"

He laughed. "Why, we never lost you. Our files on all the men are within one month of current. We've watched your progress, Charlie, if that's what you call it. You made good grades at the state university. Had enough sense to stay out of those peace demonstrations, too." Romero laughed. "We got a kick out of your going into grade-school education. I mean, a big guy like you, with notches on his gun—too much!"

Charlie wanted to punch him, to snuff him out, even—but Romero was an errand boy. That boatload of old people on Lake Bled flashed across his eyes.

"What I do is my business, not yours," he finally said.

"What you do is what you do," Romero replied noncommittally.

At first the hotel surprised him, but he recalled how the few times he traveled with the colonel they stayed in downtown locations, taking rooms on the inside if there were courtyards or air shafts. Less chance of someone blowing out the side of the building and you with it. Get up high, if possible well above the neighboring structures. Harder to sight up than down.

Romero led him to a suite on the nineteenth floor. He knocked, then opened the door. They passed into a large room. He waited while Romero went into an adjoining room, then came out and told him to go in.

It was a bedroom, but they'd rammed the bed against the wall and pulled out the desk and tried to turn it into an office.

The man seated behind the desk looked up, as though he hadn't expected him.

Charlie was shocked. This was the colonel he had known? At first he thought Romero was playing tricks. Then he looked into those gray eyes and he knew it *was* the colonel, but his shoulders were shrunken, drawn, and his face was a map of wrinkles.

"Charles," he said. "Good to see you again. Pull up a chair. We re-

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lax the discipline in the field."

There was no other chair. Charlie sat on the bed.

"Well," the older man said, "you look fit. Working with young minds is stimulating, eh?"

"It's a job."

"No, it's more, it's a calling, a profession. Perhaps a gift."

Had the old guy lost his senses? He looked so tired.

"I see you notice my condition. Cancer. I've been under the knife twice, and now I'm on chemotherapy. Prognosis is good. They give me at least five more years."

Charlie sat on the edge of the bed and said nothing. This sick creature across the desk had been responsible for the deaths of hundreds, thousands, maybe. Cancer seemed justice.

"You're not very talkative. In the old days you were always ready with a quip."

"I've grown up," Charlie said. "What do you want?"

"Yes, back then you were a real savage. Recall the mission to—"

"Lake Bled? Sure! I'll bet you and Romero still get a laugh out of those people in the boat!"

The colonel shook his head slowly. "That never happened, Charles. That's a figment of your imagination."

"It did happen! You made the others swear it didn't."

"But why would I do that? In our business a few extra deaths don't matter. Dzlos *was* in the monastery. We got him, plus his men who were dressed as priests. There was no reason for Romero to do what you claim."

"He didn't need a reason. The guy's a homicidal maniac! Those old people were frosting on his cake. I asked him later, when we were back over the border, and he said he did it because it was such a pretty day!"

"But it never happened. That was your imagination again."

Charlie rose from the bed. "I didn't come here to argue. As far as I'm concerned, you people don't exist."

The old steel edge came into the seated man's voice. "At ease. You came here because I summoned you. We exist. Your imagination can't change that fact."

"I—"

"*At ease.*" He glanced at a folder on the desk. "You did not make use of your veteran's benefits while at the university. Was this a matter of conscience?"

"Maybe." He sat again.

"Or did you fear some clerk might look too closely at your medical discharge?"

"It's a lie to cover Romero's tracks!"

"Yes, of course. But we had to

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protect ourselves. You must never forget, Charles, that we were on the side of right. That fact justifies actions which, when viewed out of context, seem deplorable."

"The ends justify the means? Yeah, the other side uses that catchy saying, too."

"Naturally, for they are also dedicated to a cause. But I didn't send for you to discuss ideology. I have an assignment, a mission."

"For me? You're kidding! I'm out, through, forever!"

"You're out when I say so, not before."

Charlie said nothing.

"That's better. One simple assignment and I'll release you."

"I won't!"

"Oh? I have some photos here, of schoolchildren, of a young woman, your wife, I believe."

He turned the folder so Charlie could see: playground shots; kids chasing a ball, running, laughing; Ann, coming from a market, packages in her arms, the wind mussing her hair.

Telephoto shots . . . Romero's work. It would be simple for that madman to exchange the camera for a rifle. Had to play it cool, not cave in.

"This is America, remember?" he replied, hearing a tremor in his voice. His palms were sweaty.

"Don't lecture me on patriotism! I've devoted my life to defending this nation! Your assignment is necessary."

"For national security? I've heard that before."

"For my security. I'm retiring, understand? Do this job and you can go your way."

"The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?"

"No. Loose ends. I need you to tie up one."

"A killing?"

"An elimination. You'll be paid a thousand now and two thousand later, plus a clean medical record."

Charlie laughed. It was all so absurd.

"I assure you I'm serious, deadly so."

"I don't doubt that, but why me? You've got Romero."

"This is one assignment he can't handle. I won't go into detail, but to ease your conscience, this person deserves to die."

"Says who, you? No one deserves death!"

The colonel sighed. "Charles, you really have no choice. You've seen the photos. You know Romero. One word from me, and—"

He had him. "All right, suppose I agree. How do I know I won't then become another 'loose end'?"

"You don't threaten me because you know nothing of substance. As

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soon as I've cleared the air, I'll disappear, never to be seen or heard from again."

"You can't. There are records," Charlie reminded him.

"Of whom, a Colonel Baker, a General Dunlap? They don't exist. Not even Romero knows my real name."

"So how can I be sure you won't cross me?"

"You can't be. But you have no alternative, unless you place no value on your students and your lovely wife."

Charlie stood up, then sat down again. "All right, what's the deal?"

"Routine, actually." He counted out ten hundred-dollar bills, old, worn, one even held together with cellophane tape.

"Buy yourself some less noticeable clothing, a neutral-colored suit, perhaps, with a matching tie."

The cloak of invisibility—Charlie recalled other briefings.

"Then you wait for a call," the colonel said. "When it comes, listen and follow instructions." He pushed the pile of money across the desk. "There will be no complications."

Charlie folded the bills and stuck them into his pocket. "My medical records?"

"Here is a photocopy of what will be put into the government computer memory." It was a small piece of paper, folded twice.

"When?"

"Soon as you leave this room."

There was no out, so he was in. Simple, even a third-grader could understand. But could Ann?

Why tell her? She knew he'd been involved in so-called intelligence work in the service.

He came out of the hotel and looked along the street. There was a department store up the block. No time like the present to get a new uniform.

He strolled into the men's section and surprised the clerk by ordering an outfit, complete from head to foot. He also got a pair of kid gloves so supple they were like a second skin.

The clerk took his big bills without question. Now, with some change, he was able to flag a hack and go home in style.

Ann would be glad to hem the trousers, but he'd have to explain. Why not? Someone should know, just in case he, Charlie Mason, was in fact a loose end.

"I know what you'll say," he said, after she looked over his purchases. "You'll tell me that no matter what, a person always has a choice between what's right and

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what's wrong, for good or evil."

"I—"

He held up his hand. "Don't. Let me tell the truth as I know it." He thumbed the switch on the small recorder's mike. The tape moved.

He spoke to Ann but also to the machine. If something happened maybe the tape would help her, though he didn't know how it could. Still, it was better than nothing.

He gave his name and his military service number, and then he reviewed his entry into the Army, paying attention to his volunteering for special duty.

"I honestly believed at the time that the nation was threatened," he declared, "and that I could do something meaningful."

He summarized his secret training, then continued: "I was sent to Europe rather than Southeast Asia. Our unit was stationed in Germany. One group was deployed to an undercover post near Munich and integrated with a multinational force whose mission was said to be focused on problems caused by certain Yugoslav agents who were causing serious problems with the Slav workers in Germany.

"I don't know the details. We were told our action was ordered by higher-ups. At any rate, we were used as a strike force against these so-called activists.

"We crossed borders without question, working both in Austria and Yugoslavia. I was on three missions. The first two concerned destroying propaganda apparatus in Klagenfurt, Austria. No shooting. Lump a few heads and burn papers, that sort of thing.

"The third mission was across the border in Yugoslavia. We were told a number-one agent named Dzlos was hiding in the monastery at Lake Bled. Five of us, led by a Major Romero, and accompanied by three Slavs, parachuted in one night. At dawn we scouted the area. Mountainous, heavily wooded. At eleven in the morning we attacked, meeting heavy resistance from five or six individuals dressed as monks.

"The Slavs with us took care of Dzlos after we neutralized enemy fire. The fighting was intense. I emptied a clip and then it was hand-to-hand.

"Romero made certain our mission was accomplished and we prepared to exit the area. It was then that we spotted a boat on the lake, some old people fishing, maybe a hundred meters out.

"It was obvious they'd seen everything, but so what? They were old folks, two women and two men, just fishing. I could see the

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poles, the lines trailing in the water.

"I turned to go, but then I felt something was wrong, and as I turned back Romero took aim and almost cut the boat in half. The old people screamed and threw up their hands. He put in a fresh clip and shot again. They struggled, went under. The boat sank.

"I wanted to help them. There wasn't time. We slipped through the forest and over the mountain to the border.

"I told the operations officer what happened, accusing Romero, but it was no use. They gave us something to make us forget things like that, quicker than the standard R&R drinking. But I couldn't forget. And when I wouldn't shut up either, they cranked the machine. The wheels turned and pretty soon I was out with a medical discharge. Nothing definite, nothing damning, but they said if I made waves they'd toss in a few details that would ruin me forever!"

Ann touched his shoulder and said, "Now I understand what you say in your sleep."

Sleep? Dreams? "Yes," he replied, "but do you understand this? Do you realize that I've got to do what they say?"

"I understand. Maybe they won't call. Maybe it's some sort of absurd joke. Maybe if we got in touch with our Congressman—my mother knows his cousin. Maybe—?"

He shook his head. "Those guys don't joke."

He waited.

A week passed and no call.

What was the delay?

It was possible the colonel died. Sure, he had cancer. It wasn't certain the doctors would tell him the truth. Five years left, he said. Maybe that was a lie. And if he'd put the good info into the computer, then he, Charlie, was home free. Of course, there was always Romero—but the colonel was the real power.

Three weeks later he was doing a social studies section with his class when a sixth-grade student on hall duty brought him a note. It said: "Come to the office. You have a phone call."

His first thought was Ann. Something had happened. Romero! If that maniac had so much as—

It wasn't Ann. The voice was flat, metallic. He knew the anonymous sound. The speaker was employing one of those modulators. It could be anybody and he wouldn't recognize him.

"Mason?"

"Yes, who is this?"

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"Listen carefully. Write nothing down."

"OK."

"Take Eastern flight 714 to Atlanta at 1447 hours this day. Upon arrival go directly to the men's washroom in the main terminal. Enter the last booth to the rear. Underneath the tissue dispenser you will find a locker key. In the locker is a piece equipped with silencer and two thousand in cash."

"But who—"

"You will go to the pay phones across from passenger service. Dial 661-4141 and have John Whitcomb paged. Whitcomb. Got that?"

"Yes."

"He'll be wearing a green topcoat and green checked hat."

"And?"

"He's your assignment. Dispose of the weapon upon completion."

The caller hung up. Charlie looked at the receiver. The mindless buzz of the telephone attracted the school secretary's attention.

"Mr. Mason, is anything wrong?" she asked.

"No—yes. I have to leave. Can someone cover for me?"

"Emergency?"

"Yes. Can you get someone?"

"I believe Ms. Logan is available."

"Good, I'll leave my lesson plans on the desk for her, then."

He went back to the classroom and told the students he had to go. They groaned when he mentioned Ms. Logan. He got his jacket and walked out of the building, thinking as he cleared the playground that it might be his last time here.

He caught a cab home. There wasn't time to call Ann. He left a hasty note, saying if all went well he'd be back before midnight. Then he changed into his new clothes and sped to the airport.

There was space on flight 714. He bought a ticket, then thought he might as well go ahead and book return passage. But no, going and coming on what amounted to a turn-around schedule would call attention, especially when the terminal police found a body. Might be best to fly first to another city before coming home. It would mean more money, but the colonel was paying.

It was slack time on the runways. The plane loaded and taxied to the end of the strip and took off. Charlie declined the stewardess' offer of a drink. This was not the time to relax. Whitcomb. John Whitcomb. Who the hell was he? Odds were that wasn't his real name. Those guys had so many names he wondered if they remembered the ones they got at

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birth. Hard to think of them as kids. Bullies? Teachers' pets? Boy Scouts? Lettermen? Maybe all of those, maybe none.

Such thinking was really more dangerous than a drink. He called the girl back and had a Scotch and water. As he sipped, he remembered. Last time he was en route to do some killing he had a chute strapped to his back and the plane was one of those twin-engine Folkers with bad windows. The wind was cold and you couldn't hear anything but its maddening screech.

Atlanta, home of hospitality and beautiful women; too bad he had neither time nor inclination for either.

He slung his topcoat casually over one shoulder and walked the long glassy corridor leading to the main terminal. There were checkpoints there, manned by security officers searching for weapons. When a passenger departed he had to pass through a metal-detection device and have any hand luggage searched. Everyone knew of this procedure, but still people were caught all the time.

He went across the main lobby, past the busy newsstand, and spotted the door to the men's washroom. Near the entrance a man was having his shoes shined. Three or four fellows were inside. Charlie moved down the stalls to the last one.

It was empty. He went in and locked the door.

The key was stuck underneath the tissue dispenser.

He pulled it free, removed the tape and checked the number: 471. He dropped it into his pocket and to avoid suspicion flushed the toilet. Then he washed and dried his hands, combed his hair, and examined his reflection in the mirror. A little shaggy-looking, perhaps, but all in all a reasonably decent-appearing young man; the kind no one would notice in a crowd.

The lockers were beyond the newsstand. He took the gloves from his topcoat pocket and pulled them on, a scene from some TV show about surgeons flashing through his mind.

Locker 471 was on a level with his chest; convenient, no stooping, no reaching. He inserted the key and opened the metal door.

A folded newspaper was inside. He spread the pages and found a sheaf of hundred dollar bills secured with a rubber band, and a pistol, silencer-equipped.

He glanced over his shoulder. No one paid him any attention.

He checked the clip, then worked the slide, thrusting a

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round into the chamber. He withdrew the cash and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. Now he put on the topcoat and dropped the piece in the right side pocket. He closed the locker and walked across the lobby toward the row of pay phones opposite passenger service.

He deposited a coin and dialed the number, at the same time watching the cute blonde behind the counter. On the second ring she picked up the receiver: "Passenger service, Ms. Gates. May I help you?"

"I hope so," he said, seeing how strange it was to watch from a distance a person you were speaking to over a wire. "Will you page John Whitcomb?"

"We're not supposed to page unless it's an emergency."

He started to say it was a matter of life and death. "It is an emergency, I promise. Ask him to come to your counter. I'll meet him."

"John Whitcomb?"

"That's right. And thanks."

She hung up, then spoke the name into a microphone. Charlie moved away from the phones and found a spot by a travel display which allowed him to watch passenger service without being seen.

He was curious and also aware of the weight of the pistol in his pocket. Who was Whitcomb? Maybe a guy he'd served with? More than likely a stranger.

A digital clock over an exit marked the crawl of time.

People passed the counter. Two stopped and spoke to Ms. Gates. Neither was Whitcomb. Where the hell was he? Maybe he wasn't coming? This was a setup engineered to get rid of him, Charlie Mason?

He looked around cautiously. Should've bought a hat and dark glasses, the kind deputies wear, so dark they can see you but you can't watch their eyes.

An airport security officer moved by slowly. Charlie studied the travel display, something to do with sunny Mexico.

When he glanced back toward the counter a man wearing a green topcoat and a green checked hat was speaking to the blonde.

Whitcomb?

The girl said something, then made an open-hand gesture as if to indicate she'd done her duty by giving him a message and it wasn't her fault if no one was here.

The man turned toward Charlie and walked away.

Romero! What the hell was going on?

He wanted to follow, but his

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feet stumbled and he had to steady himself against the display.

He was supposed to hit Romero? The colonel had said this was one job Romero couldn't handle.

He frowned, found his balance and moved after the green topcoat. This was one assignment he didn't mind at all. His hand sought the pistol in his pocket and closed about the grip. Take him in a crowd, maybe on an escalator. Get up close and bam, bam. Spine shot. They'd think at first it was a coronary and in the confusion he'd slip away, dump the piece in a refuse can, and buy himself a ticket to somewhere.

Yes, that was the plan, and it wasn't murder. It was justice! You lived by violence; OK, you died by it.

Romero moved at a rapid pace. What if he passed through a weapons checkpoint? Charlie hurried to close the gap between them.

He was near enough now to see the wrinkles on the back of Romero's neck, to hear his shoes strike the shiny floor.

A loose end, the colonel had said. Sure, Romero knew all the colonel's secrets, and—

The boat on the lake flashed before his eyes.

That was Romero's doing, but it was the colonel's, too. The colonel made Romero what he was by allowing him the freedom to kill.

He didn't have to shoot Romero, or anyone. No, just tell Romero the colonel had set him up. Yeah, then Romero would—

But he knew he wouldn't. Romero had been with the colonel so long he'd never buy a tale like that.

OK, kill him.

No! There was another way, a way Romero would believe.

Charlie ran a couple of steps and came alongside him. "Romero!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Romero stopped. His eyes narrowed. "Mason?"

"Yeah, Mason. But you know why I'm here, right?"

"I don't know anything."

They moved against the wall out of the flow of traffic.

"Then I'll tell you something," Charlie said, "and you can tell the colonel. It won't work."

"What?"

"Here, give him this." He slid the piece from his coat and pressed it into Romero's hand.

Romero looked down and jammed it into his pocket.

"Recognize it?" asked Charlie. "Sure you do. You left it in locker 471."

"I didn't know it was for you. I

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had my orders. That's all I knew."

"Yeah, and I had mine, but no more. Tell the colonel if he wants to die that bad he'll have to do it himself."

Romero blinked. "Die? You mean he—?"

"Set himself up. Cancer's painful, they say. But I guess you know how much he's suffered."

"Yes, he has."

"Well, I'm sorry but I can't do it. You tell him, OK? He must be around here. I saw him ten, fifteen minutes ago."

Romero nodded. "I'm to meet him in the first-class lounge."

"Tell him."

"But—he wanted it this way?"

"Yes." Charlie bowed his head. "Poor old guy."

"He's a great man!" said Romero.

"In great pain."

Romero looked him straight in the eye, then spun around on his heel and marched off.

Charlie watched until he was out of sight. He was tempted to follow. Would be interesting to see the look on the colonel's face when Romero showed up, and even more interesting to see what Romero did—but following him would be dangerous. Time to tend to his business, which was buying a ticket home by way of Kansas City.

He waited for his flight then and observed the travelers moving up and down the concourse.

Ten minutes later there was a flurry of excitement. At least ten security people rushed past, followed by a first-aid team in white uniforms pushing a stretcher.

A few minutes later a second team passed, with another stretcher.

When he boarded his flight and was safe in his seat, Charlie asked the stewardess if she had any idea what had happened.

"I'm not certain," she replied, "but I think one man killed another man, and then he was shot by security, or else he shot himself. In the first-class lounge. Isn't that terrible?"

Charlie shut his eyes and tried to relax. Actually, he realized, it was that, and much more.

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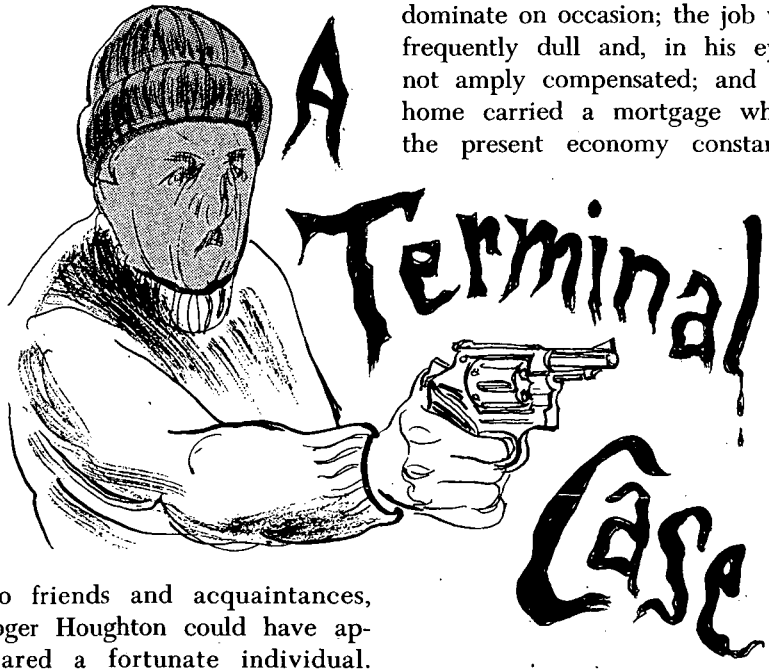
One's desire for action may result in an unexpected reaction.



A Terminal Case

To friends and acquaintances, Roger Houghton could have appeared a fortunate individual. Physically personable (twenty-eight, regular features, athletic build), he had an attractive wife (twenty-four, blonde, trim figure), a steady job (equipment expediter for a construction firm), and a nice home (suburban locale, quiet neighbors).

However, Roger was not contented. Phyllis, his wife, tended to dominate on occasion; the job was frequently dull and, in his eyes, not amply compensated; and the home carried a mortgage which the present economy constantly was rendering more excessive. So Roger had periods of depression.

He was feeling particularly glum one night when an involved contract necessitated his staying overtime at the office. It was past ten when he finally got away, and when he reached the street a chill

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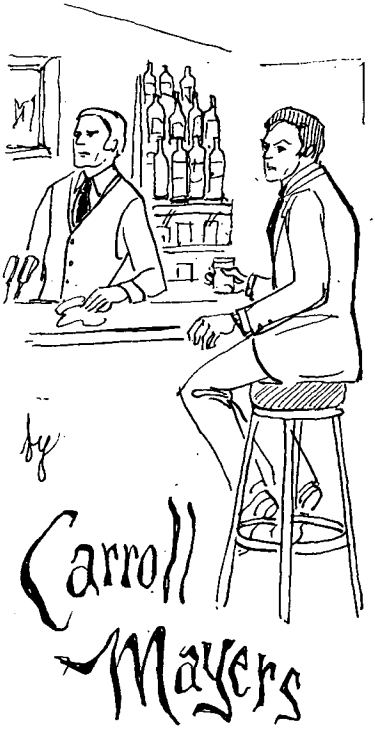
spring rain was falling. The parking lot where he'd left his car was two blocks down; a small bar was in the second block. A sudden impulse to unwind over a drink, possibly wait out the rain, took Roger inside.

The place was not overly crowded—perhaps twenty individual customers, a few couples, scattered at the bar and side booths. Roger eased onto a stool at the far end of the bar, ordered a gin and tonic. He paid for the drink, then leisurely sipped it, trying to relax and not focus his thoughts on anything that would intensify his dour mood.



"All right! Nobody moves! This's a stickup!"

The words—abrupt, decisive, menacing—stilled the bar's busy babble in one electric pulse beat. Heads swiveled, all eyes centering on the stocky figure which had slipped into the premises from a side entrance. Features masked with a woman's stocking, a nickel-plated revolver thrust forward, the man advanced quickly, darted behind the bar.

"Everybody! Wallets on the bar. You women—let's have those purses."

The revolver jerked in tight, threatening arcs as the patrons slowly complied. Several, in the booths, attempted to slip wallets behind the cushions, but froze when the gun muzzle zeroed in.

"I said everybody." Sidling along the duckboards, back to the back bar and constantly alert, the bandit punched open the cash register with his free hand, scooped out the bills without a sidewise glance.

"Now stand back. And no heroes."

Whipping out a cloth sack, the gunman began sweeping the collection of wallets and four purses

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from the bar. He moved deftly, facilitated by a compact, all-black outfit: stocking mask, trousers, turtleneck sweater, knitted cap.

Roger had ponied up with all the others. Throat tight, he sat immobile as his wallet vanished into the sack. For one long moment he risked a look at the bandit, then swiftly averted his gaze, temples pounding.

"That's smart. It'll be smarter if nobody gets any ideas for ten minutes."

The terse admonition climaxed the holdup. Slipping clear of the bar, the gunman spun, raced to the side door, was gone.

No one moved for several seconds. Then a few daring victims galvanized into action. The barkeep was one; he sprang to the phone. Four patrons shifted to the side entrance, hesitated briefly, then darted outside. The bar babble swelled again . . .

Roger tried to finish his drink, couldn't. His lips were stiff, the liquor flat. Even as the holdup's frenzied aftermath eddied around him, he relinquished his stool, left the bar. The rain had practically stopped and he reached his car with little exposure. Twenty minutes later he was home.

His wife put aside a fashion magazine as he came into the livingroom. "Hi, dear. When you phoned to say you were staying on, I didn't expect you'd be this late. Have you eaten?"

Roger slumped upon the sofa. "I went out and got a sandwich around five."

Phyllis' hazel eyes narrowed. "Is anything wrong?"

He made a vague gesture. "I stopped for a drink afterward. The place was held up by a lone gunman. I lost my wallet. Sixty dollars."

"Oh, dear!" She crossed quickly, sat beside him. "Did anything happen? I mean, are you all right?"

"Nobody was hurt, no," Roger said slowly. "It's just that—" He broke off, got to his feet and took a turn around the room.

Phyllis regarded him uncertainly. "What is it, Roger?"

He drew a breath, faced her. "I knew the bandit," he said.

"You . . . what?"

"I knew him. He wore a stocking mask over his face and an all-black outfit, but I knew him. He was Leo Land."

"The Leo Land from your office?"

"Yes."

"You must've been mistaken!"

Roger shook his head. "I know how it sounds, Phyl," he said soberly, "but he was Leo. Same height, same build, same voice, for

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all the mask muffled it." He sat down on the sofa again. "I even recognized a moonstone ring he wears."

"But it doesn't make any sense, Roger. He has a good job, making good money. I mean . . . why?"

"I don't know. I only know he was Leo."

It was Phyllis' turn to tour the room. Abruptly, she stopped. "Have you told the police?"

He shook his head again. "No."

She caught the inference in his tone. "You're not going to?"

"I believe not."

Incredulity sparked her outburst. "For heaven's sake, Roger! If you're correct, Leo Land robbed you of sixty dollars, not to mention what he took from the others. The man's no better than a common criminal!"

"That's true. But I can't specifically prove it. I've just told you, he was masked, his getup commonplace. Even the ring's not conclusive; there're probably thousands of them." He sighed again. "All Leo has to do is deny everything. With a smart lawyer in his corner, I'd look like a fool, accusing him."

Phyllis spread her hands. "But if you're not going to notify the police, what *are* you going to do? What about your future relations with the man? What about that sixty dollars he took from you?"

Roger laid his head back. "Leo knew me, of course," he said. "I've no doubt he'll return the money tomorrow. As to our future relationship, I'll work something out." Momentarily, he closed, massaged his eyelids.

Phyllis made no immediate rejoinder. Instead, she arose decisively, stepped to the phone.

Hearing her movement, Roger opened his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"*I'm* calling the police," Phyllis said.

He moved, stayed her hand; this was one time his wife was not going to dominate. "No, Phyl," he told her tightly.

"It's the only thing to do, Roger. You can't cover for Land."

"No! I said I'd work it out."

Phyllis resisted him for a moment, then capitulated, allowed him to replace the receiver. For the rest of the evening, conversation was strained. The air was still charged when they went to bed.

Lying on his back and staring into the darkness, Roger found sleep difficult. Phyllis was right, of course. Then why had he taken the attitude he had, championing Land? Was it truly because he feared Land would make him look like a fool if he accused him of the holdup? Or, rather, was there

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something else bothering him?

It was an hour before Roger closed his eyes . . .

Breakfast the next morning was largely a replay of the night before. As he left for work, Roger squared his wife's shoulders. "I know how you feel," he said earnestly, "but, believe me, I know what I'm doing."

"You don't!"

"Dammit, hon, I do. I want you to play it my way."

Phyllis avoided his gaze; then, under continued pressure, her shoulders slumped. "All right," she finally conceded.

At the office, Roger was fairly confident Land would make the first move. He wasn't wrong. A husky character about Roger's age, with shrewd blue eyes and a cocky air, Land was a contracts coordinator; he approached Roger's desk, winked solemnly. "Mum was the word, eh, Rog? I thought it would be. I'll be out of the office this morning, but shall we make it Rosetti's for lunch?"

Roger agreed. He felt a spurt of irritation at Land's assumption of his "mum" decision, but in view of his thinking last night, he stifled the emotion.

Land already was occupying a rear booth at Rosetti's when Roger arrived. He built a small smile as Roger took the bench opposite, flipped Roger's wallet onto the tabletop. "You understand, I'd flatly deny the whole bit," Land remarked easily.

Roger pocketed the wallet. "I know that," he said. "I'm only wondering, why?"

Land shrugged. "Why anything. Let's just say I've no ties and I'm bored with a stupid job. That I like to get the adrenalin pumping with a real kick. And it's a quick way to collect some extra bread."

"It's crazy. Some night you could foul up."

Land's smile came back. "Sure."

Roger swore softly. "Dammit, Leo—"

"I know. You're in an awkward position."

"That's right."

"But you haven't told anyone. Not even your wife."

The dual comment was phrased briskly. Again the man's utter confidence rankled, but by now Roger had all but committed himself. "No, I haven't," he lied.

Land's shrewd eyes were steady. "Why not?"

Roger inhaled deeply, met Land's stare. "Because—" then broke off, looked away, biting his lips. After a moment, his thinking of the night before abruptly coalescing and firming, his gaze swung back. "Because I'm as fed up as you are!" he blurted. "Be-

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cause I want to call some shots myself. And because I can use the money! I—I want in, Leo."

Across the table, Land's regard was prolonged, intent. At length, he said simply, "You're serious."

"I am."

Land shook his head. "Sorry, Rog. You're not the type."

Roger reached out, caught Land's wrist. "So I'll change. Whatever you've pegged me for, I'll change. Just try me."

A full minute passed while Land deliberately lit a cigarette, continuing to study Roger. Then he bent across the table. "All right, Rog boy. How about this . . ."

Any work Roger accomplished the balance of the day was purely by rote. His every thought was on the commitment he had made, a covenant he now regarded as irrevocable. True, he had termed Land's banditry "crazy," but at heart he knew he was awed by the very daring of the man's exploits—and was consumed with a burning desire to alter his own managed existence by emulation.

At home that evening, when Phyllis broached the matter of his confrontation with Land, Roger casually exhibited his wallet, led her to appreciate he did not care to explain.

Momentarily, Phyllis' lips thinned; then she, too, changed the subject.

Earlier, at Rosetti's, Leo Land had made it clear to Roger he was not particularly interested in acquiring a partner. On the other hand, the job to which he'd alluded could be facilitated by a wheelman. Specifically, the target was a service station at the entrance to the freeway south of the city. The time, midevening the following night. Roger was not to enter the station office with Land; no mask, no gun. He was merely to sit in the car, ready for instant blast-off when Land raced clear.

"Uptight?" Land queried when they rendezvoused at the restaurant shortly after nine the next evening.

Surprisingly, Roger found he wasn't to any great degree. He'd been able to hold his voice remarkably steady when he'd phoned Phyllis, told her he was working late again. "Not too much," he said.

"You'll do OK," Land said. "Just remember, don't panic at the last minute. There's only one attendant—the owner—and I can handle him." He paused, and added, "I've checked him out. He cashes checks on weekends for his regular customers. We could pull down a couple of thousand, maybe more."

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Roger felt a heady surge of excitement. Two thousand, half of it his for a couple minutes' work!

They were using Roger's car, an inconspicuous model with dirtied plates. Land had Roger drive across town, park on a darkened side street just off the freeway where he donned his black outfit and stocking mask, pocketed a revolver.

"That's it ahead," he said, pointing. "Stop short of the center island; that'll keep you out of those lights and the owner won't pop out to pump gas."

Roger drove as directed. No other cars were at the station. The instant Roger braked, Land was out of the car and moving fast. Six seconds saw him inside the station office.

Roger sat rigid, knuckles white on the wheel, foot heavy on the accelerator to prevent possible stalling. Any moment now . . .

The shot, when it came, was sharp, chilling. Roger's heart lurched, his eyes burned as he strained forward, trying to peer into the office.

Leo Land bolted out, gun in hand, raced forward. Roger flung open the car door, revved the motor. Time stood still.

Then, just short of the center island, Land's right foot twisted, his leg buckled and he crashed to the paving. Squirming, he tried to heave erect, fell again. Simultaneously, the attendant appeared in the office doorway, staggering, blood streaming from his head.

Sheer instinct—certainly not volition—launched Roger from the car. Even as the attendant, reeling, took three more halting steps forward and then crumpled in turn, Roger reached Land, lifted him, somehow, carried him, somehow, tumbled him into the car; then succeeded in scrambling behind the wheel and roaring off.

"Nice going, Rog boy! I turned my ankle, but no harm done."

As Roger barreled ahead on the freeway, Land straightened on the cushions, shaken but jubilant, and patted one pocket. "And we really scored, fella!"

The exultation meant nothing to Roger; his stomach was churning, his brain screaming disbelief. He couldn't be a part of this—this horrible nightmare . . . "That attendant. You shot him!"

"I had to. He went for a gun stashed next to the register." Land gave Roger a look, then said, "Relax, I only grazed his temple."

Roger could not relax; every fiber of his body was as taut as piano wire. When they cleared the freeway and reached Land's mid-city apartment twenty minutes later, he knew what he had to

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say to rid himself of Leo Land.

"I—I'm sorry, Leo. I wanted in, but I was wrong."

"Too hairy, eh?"

"Y-yes."

"You said you wanted some action."

Roger carried it no further.

Land finally shrugged. "Whatever you say." He extended a sheaf of bills. "At least your one-shot paid off. There's fifteen hundred."

"I'd . . . rather not."

Land didn't press. Pocketing the money, he said merely, "To each his own, Rog boy. But mum's still the word?"

Roger swallowed, then nodded tightly. Wordless, he left. Forty minutes later he was home.

Entering the livingroom, Roger pulled up short. Two men were seated on the sofa. The younger of the duo wore a plain business suit, his companion a green work outfit. The older man also wore a bandage about his head.

"I'm sorry, dear. I know I promised," Phyllis explained, "but Leo Land—it must've been he; the radio described that stocking mask and the black outfit—held up a service station tonight and shot the attendant. He could have killed him, Roger! When I heard the broadcast, I realized we *had* to bring in the police. I told Lieutenant Wiley, here, about the other night at the bar, said you'd be home from the office shortly. The lieutenant's driving Mr. Allenby back to his station from the hospital—"

Phyllis poured out the words in breathless exposition, but they were lost on her husband. After one harried glance toward the sofa, Roger was vividly recalling those frenzied moments when he'd leaped from the car to help Land and had been—however briefly—fully exposed in the blaze of light surrounding the station's center island, an exposure even now being recognized in the suddenly-narrowed gaze of the station owner.

Abruptly, Allenby spoke to the lieutenant.

His universe collapsing, metamorphosis definitely terminated, Roger scarcely heard him.

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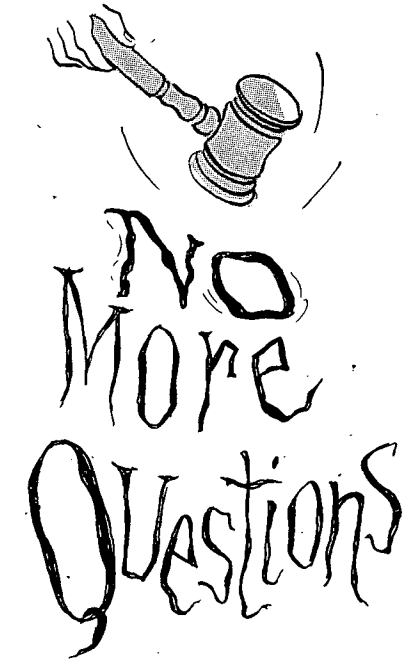
Complete honesty may not always be the best way to reach the right conclusion.



The defense calls as its last witness, the defendant, William Dempsey."

"The defendant will advance to the stand and be sworn."

"Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do."

"State your full name and occupation."

"William Tunney Dempsey. I own an appliance store in town."

"You may be seated."

"How old are you, Bill? I may call you Bill?"

"Forty-six."

"That's a fighting name you have."

"It was my mother's idea."

"Are you married, Bill?"

"Yes, for over twenty years."

"And where do you live?"

"In Jersey, just over the line."

"That's about fifty miles away. Do you commute every day?"

"Yes, including Saturdays. I drive up six days a week."

"And how long have you had your appliance business here in Wickham?"

"Close to four years."

"What made you open a business in Wickham?"

"My father died and I inherited a little money. I've always wanted a business of my own, so I looked

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and looked and finally opened this place. There wasn't one good appliance store in town."

"And how has business been?"

"Fair. But not as I expected. It's difficult for a newcomer to be accepted here. And now this . . ."

"Yes . . . Well now, Bill, the prosecution is going to try to make a big deal about that television set you gave to Maryann. I'd like to clear that matter up right from the start. I ask you to identify this portable television set which is marked Exhibit Sixteen. Is this the one you gave to Maryann?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"What make of set is it?"

"None, sir. I made it myself."

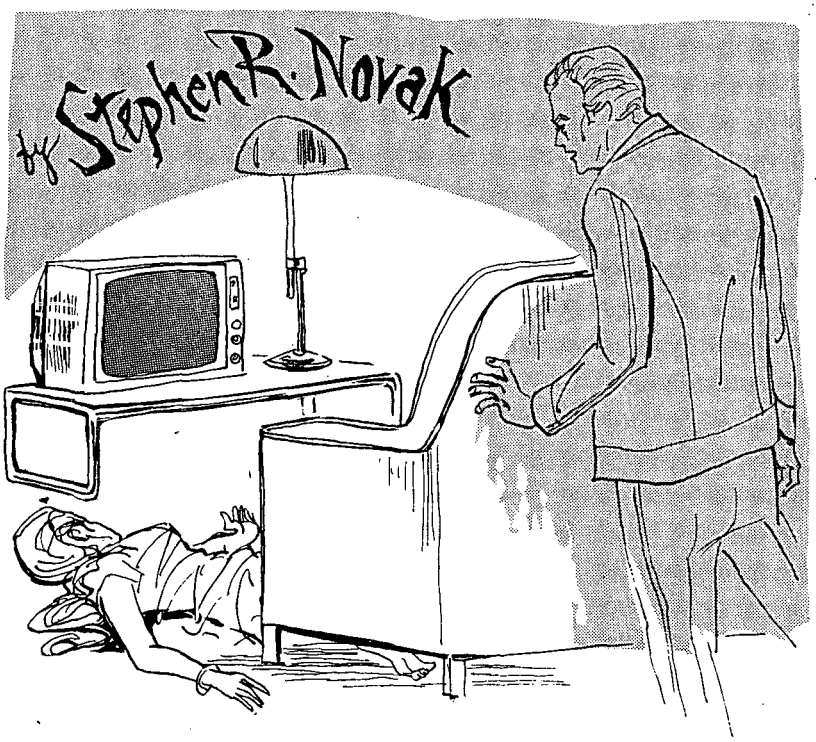
"You made it yourself?"

"Yes. I wanted to experiment with the new circuitry . . . you know, wafers and all."

"The label says Magnavox."

"I used an old portable shell because the components fit into it so neatly, and I polished it up."

"And about how much did it cost you to make?"



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"Not counting my time, about two hundred dollars for the parts. At my cost."

"So, all you actually gave Maryann was about two hundred dollars' worth of parts?"

"If you put it that way, yes, sir. But I didn't think about the money. She liked the set, so I gave it to her."

"She saw you working on it?"

"Oh, yes. She'd come in the store quite often. When I wasn't needed on the floor, I'd be back in the office working on this."

"She'd often come into your office?"

"Well, I don't know what *you* mean by often."

"Every day? Couple times a week?"

"Not every day. Maybe every second or third day."

"Tell us, if you will, about when you first met Maryann."

"Well, sir, she was in her last year of high school, and she'd stop in every so often and buy some records, you know, like most of the kids do, on their way home from school."

"And?"

"I don't know exactly how to explain it, but we got to talking to each other, and we were soon sort of confiding in each other. She always seemed much older mentally than the other high school kids, and more sensible."

"And very pretty?"

"Oh yes. Very. But she never seemed to have any boyfriends in the high school crowd. She was too much of a loner. After a while, I found out why, and I think I understood why she sort of liked to talk to me."

"We'd like to get to understand her character better, Bill. Would you tell the court why she liked talking to you?"

"I guess I must've been something like a father or uncle that she'd never really had, but always wished she'd had."

"What do you mean?"

"She never knew her real father. She grew up with a stepfather who was very nasty, drunk all the time, a big bruiser who even made passes at her once. He had lots of kids from a former wife who'd deserted him. So, Maryann was always neglected as a child and given all the dirty work and very little love. As soon as she could, she left home and went on her own."

"And how old was she then?"

"Maybe thirteen, fourteen."

"And what did she do?"

"Lived with an older married sister for a while. Then found various places to stay. Girlfriends mostly. A month here, a few weeks there. You know."

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"Did she ever tell you if she lived with any men?"

"No, sir. She never said that."

"Did you ever get the impression that she played around a lot?"

"No, sir, not when she was in high school. At least as far as I know. As I say, she always seemed so much older, but then she was so naive and trusting too."

"To you?"

"Yes, sir. She was always the kind of person you feel sorry for, without ever knowing exactly why. But yes, sir . . . she trusted me, I think. That's why she always talked to me so much. But she never mentioned any boyfriends then. Just how lousy her family had been to her. And how she wanted to hurry and finish school, get a good job and be on her own. But it seemed she never could get what she wanted."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, first of all, she flunked and didn't finish high school. Instead, she managed to get sent to some charity school on the Island with a bunch of other girls, where she was supposed to learn typing and secretarial work and all that—a trade she could work at. But she used to call me collect and tell me how rotten the place was, how brutal and cheap the other girls were. And all the narcotics too. She stayed only a couple of months, then left and came back here, where she did get a job and was able to rent the room where she was . . . where she was killed."

"Tell me truthfully, Bill, do you think Maryann was in love with you?"

"I . . . I . . . guess so. Maybe in a special kind of way. She used to tell me that all she ever wanted out of life was someone to love her."

"But you never encouraged her?"

"With me? No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why not. I don't know how to answer. Maybe because I felt so sorry for her. Because I was so much older. Because I'm married and love my wife. But, I don't wanna lie to you, Mr. Buchanan, I loved Maryann all right, but not in the way most people might think. Just in my own mind, in a special way, maybe not like a daughter, but in the same kind of protective way, where I just couldn't stand her being hurt by anyone after all she'd already been through at her young age."

"And you never told her?"

"I didn't have to tell her. She could see it, and that's why she used to tell me everything. Even

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when she found out she was gonna have a baby."

"She told you about her affair with another man?"

"Right away. The next day, in fact. And then, weeks later, when she found out she was pregnant, she was so scared that she didn't know how to tell me. She was afraid she'd lose my friendship, I think."

"And how did you react?"

"How could I? I knew right from the start this guy she was seeing was going to be trouble for her. She'd met him at a diner only a short time before—and she was so much in love. I think it was her first real romantic experience. I never liked it, but I yessed her and agreed with her because she was so happy at having found someone, even though he was married, and she was so sure he'd leave his wife for her. I just thought to myself, 'Oh yeah? Well, let's wait and see!' But I never said this to her. I tried to play along and be happy with her and for her because she was so happy. Until she found out about the baby."

"Then what happened?"

"I knew there'd be trouble. She really broke down when she told me. She said the guy was no good. He was such a big shot, she said, but with her, he was a big nothing. He always took her to the most out-of-the-way places around here, where nobody would see them together. And when he found out about the baby, he really got angry at her. He blamed her for being careless, and he said he never wanted to see her again unless she took the money he offered and got rid of the kid."

"He paid her to have an abortion?"

"Yes, sir. He gave her five hundred dollars, she said. That same night she told him. Right then and there."

"And she told all this to you?"

"Yes, sir. She told me."

"What then?"

"She didn't know what to do. She wanted to keep this guy's friendship—why, I just can't figure—but at the same time she was all broken up and mad at him. I suggested that she go see a priest or a minister, but she'd have none of that, and she sort of questioned me like I was her spiritual adviser, asking me what to do about the baby."

"And what did you advise?"

"I told her that if she had the abortion, and if fate was cruel to her in the future and never gave her another child, she might not want to live with the thought of having gotten rid of the one child

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she ever had. I also tried to make her see that if she had the baby, for the first time in her life she'd really have someone to love. I also said that she might consider having the baby and placing it out for adoption as soon as it was born. There were agencies that handled that right from the hospital. At least then she wouldn't have to live with the thought of having deprived the child of life, and she'd be sure it would be in better circumstances than she could provide, even if in future years she might regret adoption too . . . but that was certainly the lesser of her choice of evils, and probably the best for all concerned."

"How did she take these suggestions of yours?"

"I'm sure she was happier when she left than when she came in."

"But you don't know what she resolved to do?"

"No, sir, I don't. But I was sure her lover would try to force her to have an abortion."

"You hated him?"

"Yes, sir, I guess I did."

"And you never met him?"

"No. Never."

"Did she tell you who he was, his name?"

"No, sir. Just that she'd promised him not to tell anyone."

"Can you guess who he might have been? Have you any clue?"

"Your Honor, I object. Defense counsel knows better than trying to get his witness to implicate someone by innuendo. Indeed, if there is someone."

"Mr. Buchanan, you are skirting the rough edges here."

"I'm sorry, your Honor. I thought the witness might have some clue as to his identity."

"Then rephrase your question."

"Bill, did Maryann ever give you any specific indication of who her lover might be?"

"She did not."

"And how long ago was it that she told you about the baby and getting the money from her lover?"

"About a month before she was killed."

"Now, Bill, this is very important, as I know you realize. I want you to tell the court, as best you can remember, the details of the day Maryann was murdered."

"Well, sir, it was about five-fifteen in the afternoon. She must have just gotten home from work when she called me."

"She telephoned you?"

"Yes, sir. Said she had turned on the TV set and it didn't work, she wasn't getting any picture, and could I do anything about it after I finished work. I usually close the store at six, so I said I'd

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stop by and check the set. Probably just a cold solder joint, I thought. I know how much she loved that TV set, because she always kept it on when she was in, from the time she got up until she went to sleep. She never had anything of her own, you see. Never got a gift like it before . . . from anyone. So I closed the store about 6:15, took my tool caddy, got into my car and drove over the twenty blocks or so to her apartment."

"You'd been there before?"

"Several times, when I'd give her a lift home after closing. But I only went inside that one time when I carried the set inside and set it up for her. That was the only time, and that only took a few minutes."

"And when was that?"

"Just the week before."

"And that was the only time you were in her apartment?"

"Yes, sir. Except it wasn't really a whole apartment, just one room in this old private house, one room on the street front, with its own side entrance."

"Did you ever meet her landlady?"

"No. Not to my knowledge."

"And after you closed the store, you drove to her flat?"

"Yes, sir. It was dark out already. When I got there, I could see her lights were on and I could hear the TV set playing. I knocked at her side-door entrance. I knocked and knocked and there was no answer. I tried the doorknob and it opened. At first, I didn't see her, 'cause the couch faced the other way. First thing I saw was the TV set, sounding off with one of the children's programs, cartoons I think, but absolutely no picture—just a blank screen."

"Then?"

"I called her. I thought she might be with the landlady or in the bathroom, but no answer. Then as I walked farther into the room I saw her there on the floor in front of the couch. Her face was all bruised and she was just lying there, still, all crumpled up. I touched her and I saw she was dead."

"Then what?"

"Then what? Oh, I think I cried. I heard myself sobbing. I must have shut off the TV set. Yes, I cried. And I got murderous angry that he could have done this to her, beaten her to death."

"How long was it before you called the police?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

"And they arrested you for her murder?"

"Yes, sir."

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"And did you, William Tunney Dempsey, I ask, kill Maryann Ravelle?"

"No, sir. I swear I did not kill her."

"And now, Bill, with his Honor's permission, I am going to turn you over to Mr. Whitaker, the district attorney, for his cross-examination. I'll have a few more questions to ask you later on redirect."

"Yes, sir."

"Your witness, Mr. Whitaker."

"Well, William Tunney Dempsey, your attorney has tried to portray you as sort of a generous poor slob, with a kind heart and a father's protective instinct over this poor little innocent girl who you say was killed by a person unknown, by a lover unknown who fathered her unborn child, paid her to have an abortion, then in a murderous rage beat this poor girl to death, killing not only her, but, if you are right, this unborn child of his. Am I correct? Is that the gist of your testimony?"

"I object, your Honor; I object to the slanderous sarcasm used by the district attorney."

"Objection overruled. You may continue, Mr. Whitaker."

"If I've offended learned counsel, I apologize, but I see his client as a vicious, calculating, heartless murderer, who, to exonerate himself, after having had an affair with this child not half his age, has concocted this absurd story of another lover to draw suspicion away from himself and create a sympathetic doubt in the jury's mind. Well, I for one don't believe that this jury will overlook the facts of this crime based on the testimony of all the witnesses who have sworn under oath to the relationship existing between this defendant and the victim."

"Is the district attorney making his summation at this point?"

"I'm sorry, your Honor."

"No speeches. Confine your remarks to questions of the defendant."

"Mr. Dempsey, do you deny the testimony given by your employees that they would see Maryann come in time and time again and go right into your office, without knocking, where she'd stay for hours? Do you deny their testimony that they saw her drive away with you many evenings after closing?"

"No, sir. I don't deny any of that. But they have all read something into our relationship which just wasn't there."

"Oh, really? You mean to tell me that a man of your age, a good-looking, mature man of the world—you mean to tell me you were immune and not stirred by

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the affections shown you by this young girl? Weren't you flattered? And didn't you return that affection?"

"I was flattered, yes. But I did not return her affection . . . not the way you mean."

"And just what do I mean? I haven't asked that question yet."

"You're implying an affair which didn't exist."

"You are so right; that is my next question. Do you deny having had sexual relations with Maryann Ravelle?"

"Yes. I deny it. I certainly do deny it!"

"And can you prove you did *not* have relations with her?"

"I object, your Honor."

"Objection sustained."

"Do you deny having the *opportunity* for an affair?"

"I object again, your Honor."

"Objection overruled. I think that's a proper question."

"How can I deny having the opportunity? Certainly I drove her home many times. I can't get witnesses to prove we went straight from the office to her home, or witnesses to say I stayed only a minute or two outside, or that I never went in the house, or that I didn't meet her somewhere on the sly. Of course I can't deny opportunity."

"Thank you, Mr. Dempsey. Let's turn now to the gifts. Are you normally a generous person?"

"What do you mean by normally?"

"Well, do you give things to *all* your employees, *all* your customers?"

"Of course not."

"Do you give gifts to *some* of your customers?"

"Sometimes. Yes."

"Give me some examples."

"I can't think of any special examples. Certainly, when I like a person, I give small gifts, like records or things like that."

"But never television sets?"

"No, sir."

"Yet you gave Maryann a color television set. Did you give her any other gifts?"

"Just for Christmas and her birthday. You know."

"That's all? You never gave her money?"

"Oh, money. Yes, I guess I did, occasionally."

"How much and how occasionally?"

"You know, ten dollars here. Five there. Just to keep her going when things were tough."

"And you expect this jury to believe there was nothing more than pure friendship between you and the girl?"

"Just friendship."

"Did you ever tell your wife

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anything at all about Maryann?"

"I object to this line of questioning, your Honor. I don't see that it's relevant in view of the fact that the defendant's wife has already testified to that. District attorney is trying to prejudice the jury."

"Your Honor, learned defense counsel is correct. I am trying to show the character of the witness is indeed in question here."

"Objection overruled."

"No. I never mentioned it to my wife."

"But Maryann knew you were married?"

"Yes. She did."

"And you saw nothing wrong with this young girl establishing a relationship with you, a married man, yet you want this court to believe this fictitious story of another married man she supposedly knew only four months? The defense has not produced one shred of evidence to prove the identity, let alone the existence, of another man! I submit, your Honor, that there never was such a third party. I submit, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that the defendant has fabricated this story to cover his own sins, that he was the father of—"

"Mr. Whitaker! How long must I pound this gavel to get your attention? The jury will disregard the district attorney's heated statements. Mr. Whitaker, you will kindly save your emotional outbursts for the summation to the jury."

"Yes, your Honor, I'm sorry. Now, Mr. Dempsey, if such a third party did exist, and I emphasize the word 'if,' why do you think he would have killed Maryann? If he was so concerned with his reputation as you suggest?"

"I think she must have refused to have the abortion. That she told him so. And, in a fit of anger, he hit her, probably accidentally killing her."

"That's your guess?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Dempsey, you admit having a relationship with this girl; you expect us to believe in your virtue. You admit giving her gifts; you expect us to believe you are merely a generous person, without motives. You were at the scene of the crime when the police arrived; you expect us to believe that you did not run because it was your duty to stay. You expect us to believe that you were in her apartment only once before; yet so many witnesses saw you drive there with her time and time again. You expect us to believe in the existence of another man, when no one, not one single witness, has corroborated your testi-

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mony. You want us to believe all this?"

"Yes. Because it's true."

"Then what happened to the five hundred dollars this lover supposedly gave her? The police didn't find it. No bank accounts. No evidence of large purchases. Nothing. What do you think she did with that supposed money?"

"I don't know. Maybe she gave it back to him."

"No more questions, your Honor."

"Mr. Buchanan, do you wish to redirect at this time?"

"Your Honor, I would prefer adjourning until the day after tomorrow, so that I might review the testimony."

"Very well. Any objection from the district attorney?"

"No objection."

"This court stands adjourned until ten o'clock Thursday morning."

"This court is now in session, the Honorable James R. Flanigan presiding."

"The defendant is reminded that he is still under oath. Mr. Buchanan, you may proceed with your redirect examination."

"Before I begin, your Honor, may I ask the court's permission to have my assistant come forward with an electrical extension and connect the power to the television set, State's Exhibit Sixteen?"

"For what purpose, Mr. Buchanan?"

"The defendant has testified that the set was in need of repair. I wish to corroborate that testimony."

"Does the district attorney object?"

"No, your Honor."

"Proceed, then."

"Jack, will you connect that extension, please? Thank you. Now, Bill, you claimed that Maryann had called you to repair the television set and that when you arrived, one of the first things you noticed was that the sound was playing, but there was no picture. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you now leave the stand and turn the switch of the TV set?"

"The on-off switch?"

"Right. Fine. That's it. Is it on? Now, I see nothing but a dark screen, no picture at all, no lines, nothing, the same as if the set were turned off. Am I right, Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nevertheless, we do hear the sound of people talking . . . I think that's a Channel 7 show. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is. It's tuned to Channel 7."

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"May I ask your Honor for permission for this witness to step down temporarily so that I might recall Sergeant Capilan of the Wickham police department?"

"Very well. Sergeant Capilan will take the stand please."

"Now, Sergeant, I ask you to recall the scene of the crime. When you arrived, was this television playing or not?"

"It was not playing, sir."

"And did you or anyone else, during the entire time this set has been in the custody of the police department, turn this set on to test it, or perhaps make repairs to it?"

"No, sir, we did not. We merely dusted it for prints."

"And, of course, as you've already sworn to, you found the prints of both the defendant and the victim?"

"That's correct, sir."

"And the set has been under your control and custody all this time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Will the defendant please resume the stand? . . . Now, Bill, I would like to ask you more about this set. You said you made it?"

"Yes, I did. From components that I had or bought."

"Then you know the set pretty well?"

"Yes, I do—I know it very well."

"I'm going to ask you, Bill, with the court's permission, to see if you can't quickly repair that set for us here and now."

"Your Honor! I object to this display of showmanship by the defense counsel."

"Do you have a purpose, Mr. Buchanan?"

"Your Honor, my client's guilt or innnocence may very well depend on that television set. I'd hate to have the court deny him every opportunity."

"Very well. Proceed."

"Bill, would you take your tool caddy, the State's Exhibit Twenty-Four, and proceed to repair the set, if you can?"

"I'll try."

"I call your attention, your Honor, for the record, to the fact that the defendant is now turning the set over, loosening some screws, sliding the component tray out and checking the wire circuitry beneath. Have you spotted the trouble?"

"Looks like a loose connection, as I thought. Just a moment for this soldering iron to heat and . . . there, now we might have a picture. Yes, there it is."

"I was right, your Honor. It's a Channel 7 show in living color. Thank you, Bill. You may turn the set off and take the stand again.

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Now, Bill, that cabinet, the outside wood, where did that come from?"

"That was an old Magnavox portable. I took the old works out and put the new components in. It was a lightweight cabinet and cut just right for the controls."

"You mean the tuning knob, the volume and tone controls?"

"Yes, sir."

"And tell me, Bill, is there any indication—any marking whatsoever—on the cabinet, or on the controls, or anywhere, to indicate whether this set is black and white or color?"

"No, sir. There is not."

"And tell me, did you, at any time during your testimony—or did I, in any of my questions—did either of us indicate whether this was a color set?"

"No, sir, we did not."

"And exactly why, Bill, did neither you nor I mention that this was a color set?"

"Because we knew that the only other person who could possibly know it would be Maryann's lover."

"And did we know all along the identity of Maryann's lover?"

"Yes, sir. We knew. But we couldn't prove it."

"And how did we know?"

"Because Maryann had told me who her lover was."

"Then you lied in your prior testimony?"

"Yes, sir, I lied."

"Why did you lie? With my approval, I might add, and, your Honor, we throw ourselves to your mercy. Why did you, Bill—or we—lie?"

"Because we knew he was so powerful. We knew it was my word against his. We hoped . . . and we felt sure that he'd say something, ask something, which would give us proof."

"But, Bill, couldn't he have *guessed* it was color? Most sets sold today are color."

"Yes, but only he would have known about the exact time he first met Maryann, four months ago. I was careful not to mention that either."

"No more questions. Your witness, Mr. Whitaker."

But the district attorney was weeping.

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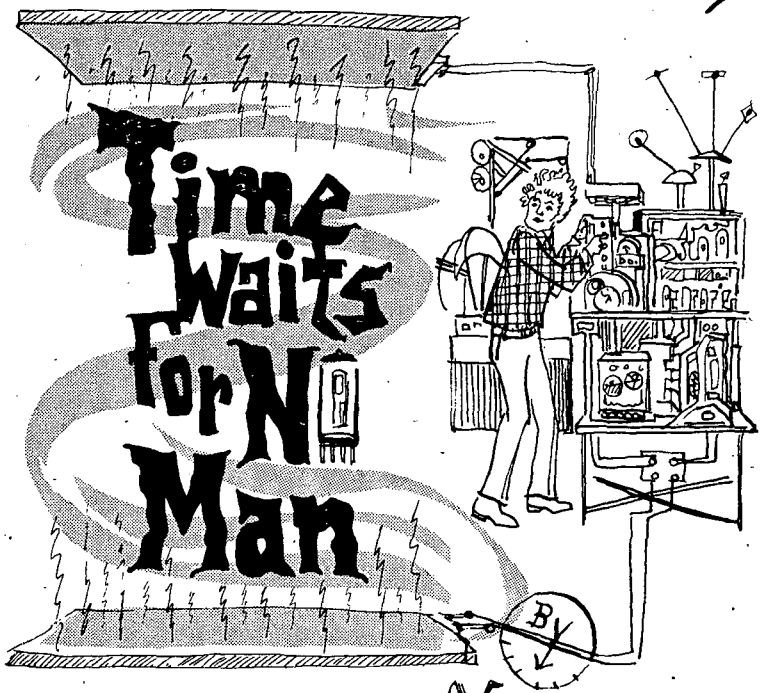
There may be a fine line of demarcation between a dream and a nightmare.



Carl Ecklund pounded up the basement stairs and burst into the kitchen with a shouted "Eureka!" Sweeping his frizzed blond hair out of his eyes, he wiped his sweaty palms on his plaid lumberjack shirt. "I did it, honey!" he exclaimed, "I did it! It took every vacuum tube I had, but the machine's working now."

Sherry, his wife, regarded him sourly. "I'll bet," was all she said. Her bored blue eyes dropped back

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to the movie magazine that held her in thrall.

He wilted like a leaky balloon. "Really," he said defensively, "I did. It's all set. All I have to do is write up the patent application, and we're on our way."

"To what?" she jeered. "Deeper poverty?"

"No," he insisted, stung by her lack of faith, "we're going to be famous. Really famous. And rich," he added, to please her. The words revived the mood; he picked up the strands of the daydream and studied their pattern. The farmhouse kitchen with its cast-iron stove dissolved into a blur. His blink altered it to a gleaming establishment crowded with sleek, important guests. Sherry's tattered pink housecoat became a Parisian gown; her stringy, mouse-brown hair gained body and luster enough to delight a bevy of photographers. He smiled happily as he located an appropriate niche for his Nobel prize medal.

Breaking the spell with a coarse comment, she dragged him back to the present. "You know damn well we're never going to be rich. Or famous. Not through our own efforts."

The bud of irritation in his heart blossomed into anger. "Don't talk that way, Sherry. My invention will revolutionize the—"

"Your invention," she sneered. "You haven't had a single invention come out right yet. What'd you build this time? A self-cleaning canary cage?"

"No." He controlled his temper with an effort. "It's a time machine."

She threw the magazine into the air and roared with amusement. "A time machine? You haven't even been able to fix that broken clock." Her eyes flicked meaningfully to the bare spot on the kitchen wall.

"That's different," he said. "I haven't fixed it because I haven't been able to find the part. If I had the part, I could fix it in no time. It's just that the hardware store—"

"Oh, don't give me that!" She stood up and brushed cookie crumbs off her housecoat. "Once a week you come charging up out of the basement, and you tell me you've done it, you've built something that'll make us rich and let us live happily ever after."

"Well," he shrugged, "I—"

"I'm not buying it. I did, for a long time—we've been married for four years, and I believed you for most of them. But now I know better. You're no basement genius. You're a crackpot. Rich!" she sniffed. "We'll be rich when that

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lab you work in gives you a raise. Or when your uncle dies. And the closest you'll ever come to being famous is when they print your obituary. I can see it now: 'Ecklund, Carl, age 38, peacefully, at the Sunnyvale Loony Bin.' That's how famous you'll ever be."

"Sherry, I—"

"Listen to me," she hissed. Hands on her hips, she leaned forward, as if into a strong wind. Her blue eyes burned with outrage. "I have had it up to *here* with your nonsense. You spend every extra penny we've got on your machines, to buy parts and pieces. We gotta live in this *hovel* because you wanta play at being Tom Swift. Well, no more, mister. I'm not going to put up with it anymore. I'm gonna take action."

That puzzled him. "What do you mean? A divorce?"

"Hah!" She settled into one of the straight-backed chairs with regal confidence. "A divorce? When you've got a rich uncle who's just barely hanging on? An uncle who's gonna leave it all to you? What do you think, Carl?"

"I don't know. I asked you to—"

Her smile approached the limits of a leer. He'd never noticed before, but her white teeth tapered to fanglike points. "I've got a lawyer coming here the day after tomorrow. He'll let you know what's going on, when he's ready."

The kitchen table gave him support in his moment of dizziness. It didn't take long for him to conclude that she would attempt to have him declared insane. He should have seen it coming, should have prepared for it somehow. She'd been mocking him for weeks, and all her ridicule had focused on his hunger to use his hands, and his brain, to create conveniences for the world of tomorrow. Aghast, he stared at her. "Hey," he said shakily, "you can't—"

"Just watch me."

Ecklund's heart was racing as he wrestled the battered pickup onto the dirt road that led to the farmhouse. So tense with fearful excitement that he could barely see straight, he ran through his plan one more time. She had to be stopped. She couldn't be allowed to commit him. That would keep him from proving himself—and from becoming famous.

First hitch. Had she gone shopping with Mrs. Brown that morning, as she'd planned? The odds were that she had. They had no telephone, so she couldn't call to have her purchases delivered. Their only transportation was the

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truck he was driving, and the town was a good five miles away. Even the bus stop was a mile down the road, and it was unlikely that Sherry, lazy as she was, would have walked to it. His clammy palms slipped on the steering wheel, and had to be dried on his shirt. He could put his trust in Mrs. Brown, and in their inadequate larder. Sherry had had to buy food, and Mrs. Brown had definitely offered to take her to the store. That one unimpeachable witness would prove that she had been alive and well in the late morning—long after he had gone to work.

Second hitch. Had she, for any reason, tampered with the machine? His left hand patted the metallic bulge in his pants pocket. After locking the workroom door that morning, he had carried off the only key. Again, the odds were that she hadn't been able to enter, even if she'd wanted to.

Third hitch. Would his alibi hold up? He thought back. He'd stayed at his sink all day. He'd made a point of asking each of the technicians, and several of the doctors, if they had any special instructions for the test tubes that were to be washed. They'd probably be willing to testify that he'd been present all day. He'd had lunch in the hospital cafeteria with two of the secretaries; they'd remember that, because he'd bought them coffee. In the afternoon, well, nobody could prove that he'd even stepped away from his post, much less been gone an hour, which was how long it would have taken him to make a round trip between hospital and home.

Fourth hitch. Would the Karrs arrive for dinner on time? He'd told them to get there about five-fifteen, explaining that he'd rather finish barbecuing while the sun was still up. Mike Karr had a reputation as a fanatically prompt individual. As best he could calculate, they'd pull into the yard a minute or so after he'd disposed of Sherry. That would be perfect, because no policeman in his right mind would believe that a man could get home from work, do something to his wife, and hide her so well that she couldn't be found, all in fifteen minutes. They'd assume that she'd run off, or been snatched.

The house appeared over the edge of the rise and he relaxed. Everything looked good. All he had to do was make sure she'd seen Mrs. Brown, and that would be fairly easy. He parked the pickup, removed the ignition key, and rushed into the house. "Sherry?" he called.

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"Yeah." It came from the livingroom.

He doffed his coat and went in. "Hi, honey. Hey, did you remember to get the beer?"

"Yeah." She was in one of her sullen moods, and would be difficult. But if she'd been churlish with Mrs. Brown, then her disappearance would be less surprising.

"Um. How was Mrs. Brown?"

"The same."

"Did you have any trouble shopping?"

"No." Narrowing her plucked eyebrows suspiciously, she demanded, "What are you asking me that for? You never cared about shopping hassles before."

"Yeah, well—" he shrugged "—guess I never thought about it before."

"You're just trying to butter me up so I won't see the lawyer," she accused. "But you can't make me forget about it."

"Yeah, I know that." He looked at his watch: 5:07 already. Time was moving too quickly. "Hey, come on down to the workshop. I want to show you something."

"Why don't you just bring it up here?"

"Too heavy to carry." He wiped a drop of sweat from his upper lip. "Come on, it's something I made just for you."

"Oh?" She tossed her magazine onto the coffee table and sat up. "What is it?" She tugged her slippers on.

"A surprise."

"Huh," she said skeptically, but she followed him out of the room and down the stairs. While she waited for him to remove the padlock on the metal door, she got in another dig: "Why do you bother to lock it? Nobody'd want to get in."

Swallowing his ire, he swung the door open. "Go on." He waved her in.

"It's dark."

"Part of the surprise. Look at the left rear corner when I turn the light on." Her back was toward him as she peered into the shadows. His fingers curled around the four-by-four he'd left propped against the wall. He flicked the light switch, and she made an irritated noise.

"Carl," she said, turning to him, "there's nothing—"

Her skull shattered before she could utter another word. Ecklund's arm tingled; his eyes went wide. "Damn," he whispered, dropping to his knees beside her. He grabbed her wrist, but could find no pulse. "Damn!"

Killing her hadn't been part of the plan. He'd meant to knock her out, so that she wouldn't be

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able to put up any resistance. Not that he wasn't tough enough to handle her, but he didn't want his clothes torn or his face scratched when he told the Karrs his wife had mysteriously disappeared; and anything but a blow to the head—knockout drops in a drink, for instance—would have required more time than he could spare. "Ah, well," he sighed, trying to force himself to adjust to the unfortunate change of scenario, "what's done is done, can't be undone. Make the best of it."

Keeping that in mind, he rose to his feet. From his point of view, the only tangible difference between an unconscious wife and a dead one was the pool of blood that was spreading across the concrete—and even that could be turned to his advantage. It would give him an excellent reason to display alarm when the Karrs arrived. He checked his watch: 5:11. Mike Karr, with his passion for timing, would be parking his van in the yard in four minutes. Just barely enough time to dispose of the corpse and get in one good gloat.

Careful not to bloody his shoes, he edged around his wife and approached the machine. It was already plugged in, but he gave the socket a brief inspection, just to be sure. Then he turned to the dials. He set the date indicator at May 1, 1400 A.D. That was far enough in the past for any Indian legends about a strange white corpse to die out long before the first explorers went up the coast. For a moment he thought of sending it farther back, but the power used was proportional to the time traveled. For safety's sake, he set the mass indicator at 125 pounds. Sherry had claimed to weigh 110, but she'd been vain.

All was ready. He'd turn the machine on, and the plates—one on the ceiling and one on the floor—would energize. The space between them would be warped in a special way, and would become, in essence, a doorway into the past. All he'd have to do would be to toss her into the time field. It would catch her, and hurl her 575 years into the past. The weapon would meet the same fate.

It would be the perfect crime. He'd tell the Karrs he was worried: she was gone and there was fresh blood on the floor. They'd search the area while he dashed down to the Browns to call the police, who would come out, rub their chins thoughtfully, and probably take him into custody. They'd check his alibi, find that he'd had a mere forty-five minutes unaccounted for, and know that

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no matter how quickly he'd driven, he couldn't have reached his house, murdered his wife, and buried her so thoroughly that they couldn't find the grave. So they'd mutter, apologize, and release him. They'd spend the rest of their days searching for an unknown maniac who'd carried off his victim's body. He'd spend the rest of his days basking in glory, with the companionship of those who valued him as he deserved to be valued.

He shook his head to snap himself out of his daydream. He didn't have much time. His thumb depressed the yellow button that started the machine. Sparks leaped from the metal plate on the floor to the one imbedded in the ceiling. The air between them turned swirly and opalescent. It was set.

It was 5:13. He took Sherry by the wrist and ankle, and lifted. The muscles of his lower back screamed in protest. She was heavy, heavier than he'd expected, but he got her swinging back and forth. He was just about to release her when the machine gave a polite little "plurf." All its lights went dead.

Exasperated, he dropped her to the floor. The machine was suffering from a familiar malady. The time field had applied too much stress to the ceiling plate, pushing it a centimeter out of alignment. That overmodulated the current, which blew out a vacuum tube, which shut the whole thing down. It'd take him thirty seconds to repair. Just tap the plate back into place, pull the burned-out tube and stick in a new . . .

The realization hit him with stunning force, as though the machine had toppled onto his head. Slowly, rigidly, he turned to his workbench. He took a stiff step toward it, even though he knew that nowhere on it, in it, under it, or behind it, was there a replacement tube.

He'd used the last of them the day before. There were no more.

From the driveway came the sound of an engine shutting off. Dully, he glanced at his watch: 5:15. Mike Karr loved to be on time.

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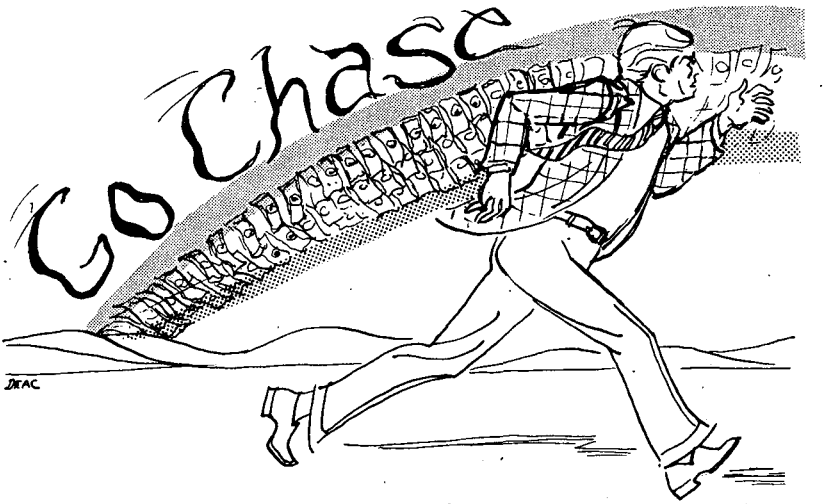
Finding that proverbial needle in a haystack may depend on pinning down the right vice.



Frank Dale, licensed private investigator, believed in keeping overhead expenses to a minimum. His advertising was strictly word of mouth. The switchboard of his run-down apartment hotel provided free around-the-clock answering service, and the back booth of a neighborhood tavern served as his favorite office.

On this particular February morning, Dale sat in his office reading the morning newspaper and drinking black coffee. He was the only customer in the dingy place. A bar ran the length of one wall and booths lined the opposite wall. Vinnie, the owner, was busy behind the bar. A radio playing in the background quoted the Motor City temperature at two above zero, with a heavy-snow warning.

Dale was about to skip over the financial pages when a headline caught his eye: TREASURER ACCUSED OF DEFRAUDING COMPANY OF $200,000. Dale read on:

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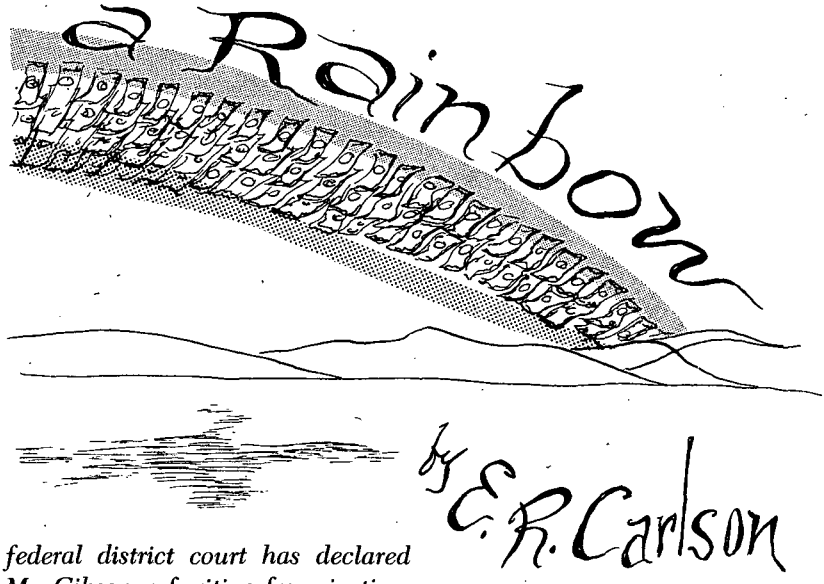
John Gibson, treasurer of Brown Brothers Construction, has been charged with defrauding the company of $200,000.

Gibson, a 47-year-old widower, disappeared Jan. 20, according to authorities. A complaint filed in federal district court has declared Mr. Gibson a fugitive from justice.

Brown Brothers Construction discovered the $200,000 missing in a special audit conducted late in January. The company called in the FBI.



"Well, I'll be damned," Dale said softly to himself. He thought back to a day not long ago when he had called on this same John Gibson at the headquarters of Brown Brothers Construction. He'd been hired to collect a gambling debt resulting from a $1,500 rubber check passed by Gibson in a high stakes poker game. Dale was instructed to stop short of physical violence in collecting the debt because Gibson was a pigeon to be plucked again and again.

Gibson presented a picture of affluence sitting in his plush office, a large, balding, middle-aged man. Dale flashed the rubber check and made it clear he didn't intend to let Gibson out of his sight until he got the money. Gibson was first indignant, then frantic. He begged Dale to meet him after working hours. Dale was adamant.

Gibson finally got the message: the only way to get this tough-

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talking intruder out of his office was to pay him. They left Gibson's office and drove to his apartment. Dale made himself comfortable in the livingroom while Gibson unlocked a desk, withdrew a metal cashbox, and counted out $1,500. Dale delivered the money to his client, minus ten percent commission, and the case was closed.

Dale reread the newspaper article. It didn't tell him much, just that Gibson was on the run. There was no telling how much of the $200,000 Gibson had with him. He could have gambled it all away. Dale mulled it over in his mind and decided to forget it. It was a tempting daydream, catching up with Gibson before the law did, but Dale had no insights as to Gibson's whereabouts.

Still, it would be like taking candy from a baby if Gibson could be located. What Dale needed was someone to point him in the right direction. He gave it some thought and came up with a possibility, the client who had sicced him on Gibson. It was worth a dime to check it out. Then he would definitely forget it. Dale walked over to the pay telephone and dialed a number from memory.

"Yeah?"

"Jack, this is Frank Dale."

"Yeah, Frank, how are you?"

"Have you read the morning paper?"

"Yeah, including the financial section. And I know what you're thinking. Forget it."

"He could be loaded."

"Not likely. Probably running with empty pockets by now."

"I wonder. Any objections if I give it a whirl?"

"No conflict. But it's a thousand-to-one shot."

"Any ideas on where to look?"

"Not really."

"Anything at all?" asked Dale.

"Well, poker wasn't his only vice. He liked the horses too. The last time he sat in with us, he was counting the days until Oaklawn opened."

"Hot Springs, huh?"

"For what it's worth. He's been there before."

"Think the law knows about his gambling?" Dale asked.

"Probably. What else is there besides gambling and women to cause a guy to embezzle two hundred grand?"

Dale thanked him and hung up. He borrowed Vinnie's *Daily Racing Form* off the bar and took it back to his booth. He paged through it until he located Oaklawn. The track was open.

Two mornings later Dale drove his mud-spattered sedan into the

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pleasant-appearing little town of Hot Springs, Arkansas. He parked near the center of town, got out of the car and stretched. The weather was mild and sunny, and he felt pleased about his decision to come to Hot Springs. As a business venture, he knew it stank. But what the hell, he kept telling himself, he could use a vacation.

Dale bought a street map of the town and located the racetrack on Central Avenue, a couple of miles from downtown. There was already plenty of activity around old, freshly painted Oaklawn Park although post time wasn't until 1:30 p.m. Returning to the center of town, he found a tourist house displaying a vacancy sign on a side street.

The proprietor, a slightly deaf old woman wearing a housecoat and slippers, showed Dale a small, clean room on the second floor. The room contained a double bed, a chest of drawers, and a student-size desk and chair. The old woman told him she only rented by the week and pointed out a bathroom across the hallway to be shared with two other roomers, both men. He questioned her about a telephone, got the number from her only after promising to use it sparingly, if at all. Satisfied, he told her his name was Smith and paid her a week's rent in advance. Satisfied also, she left him.

Dale moved into the room and unpacked his suitcase. He sat down at the uncomfortable little desk and proceeded to write the name Smith and the telephone number of the tourist house on the back of fifty wallet-size pictures of John Gibson. Before leaving Motor City, he had visited the business section of the downtown public library and removed Gibson's picture from a Brown Brothers annual report. An acquaintance in the photography business made the copies for him.

It was past noon when Dale finished endorsing his fifty pictures, but he didn't feel hungry enough to eat lunch. He left the tourist house and drove to Oaklawn Park. Traffic was bumper to bumper as he neared the track. Instead of using the track parking lot, he turned down a side street and parked at the curb in a residential neighborhood.

Dale paid a dollar at the admission gate, bought a program for a quarter, and walked under the grandstand to some benches in the open near the track railing. He sat down, inspected the tote board in the beautifully landscaped infield, and listened to the pounding hooves and heavy breathing of the horses being exercised. It was still a half hour to post time.

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Glancing through his program, Dale found he was unfamiliar with the horses and riders. To make things tougher, none of the horses had raced this year at Oaklawn, the track having just opened the previous Friday. He shrugged his shoulders and quickly marked his selections for all nine races, avoiding the favorites. He turned and looked up at the grandstand. It was rapidly filling with thousands of people. Somewhere in that crowd he hoped to find Gibson, a needle in a haystack. He just hoped Hot Springs was the right haystack.

Dale went to the sellers' windows, got in line at the $10 window and placed his bet for the first race. He always bet to win, which cut down considerably on the amount of time spent standing in line at the cashiers' windows. Dale viewed horse racing as good entertainment. Anybody who gambled at it seriously he pegged as a fool.

So began a long afternoon of mingling with the crowd, searching for Gibson. The first race started promptly at 1:30 p.m. and the other races followed at half-hour intervals. Dale finally picked a winner in the fourth race, a 3-to-1 shot named Small Gun. He cashed in his $10 win ticket and treated himself to a corned beef sandwich and a bottle of beer.

As the afternoon wore on, Dale began to realize the magnitude of his task. The crowd became a blur of faces, thousands of faces, and he had but one pair of eyes. He could not properly search a crowd of ten thousand or more so he decided to start showing Gibson's picture... He hit the admission gates first, then the program sellers, and finally the cashiers' windows during a lull before the ninth and final race. Nobody he contacted could recall seeing Gibson.

Dale glumly took up a position where he could watch the crowd exit from the track after the last race. His legs were tired from standing and his eyes were tired from looking. He had picked only one winner in eight races and his prospects in the ninth race were dismal, a 40-to-1 shot named Buxombay. He followed the race over the public-address system and to his amazement his horse was in there for a photo finish. Hold all tickets. He waited impatiently for the results to be announced. There was a roar from the crowd and he had a winner in a rare dead heat for first.

Dale rushed to the cashiers' windows and got in line, Gibson temporarily forgotten in the excitement of winning. When his

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turn came, he presented his $10 win ticket and got a nod of recognition and $400 from the cashier. By then, most of the crowd had left the track and he decided to call it a day. He pocketed his winnings and walked to his car. A well-dressed, dark-haired man followed Dale from the track and cursed the mud-spattered license plate he tried to read as Dale drove off.

Later that night, rejuvenated by a good steak dinner, Dale decided to take another stab at locating Gibson. He walked up and down Central Avenue, passing out Gibson's picture to desk clerks and bartenders, telling them it was worth a hundred bucks to him to locate the man in the picture. At midnight, with more than a few shots of whiskey under his belt, he returned to the tourist house and fell asleep across the bed without undressing.

Dale woke up the next morning with a headache. He had overslept—it was nearly ten o'clock. He took some aspirin, and in less than fifteen minutes he was shaved and showered and dressed for the street. He left the tourist house and walked to a restaurant where he ordered breakfast and washed it down with plenty of black coffee.

After breakfast he took an aimless walk, undecided as to what to do. So far he had uncovered no trace of Gibson in Hot Springs. He had half a mind to forget the whole thing and head home. Yesterday's winnings at the track would more than cover his out-of-pocket expenses, but he couldn't put Gibson's $200,000 out of his mind. He decided to give it another day, check some motels and maybe the airport before going to the track.

He picked up his car at the tourist house and began checking motels, showing Gibson's picture. He had contacted a dozen of them with negative results before he noticed he was being followed. He made a few random turns and headed for Oaklawn Park. Sure enough, a late model, blue car driven by a dark-haired man tailed along. Dale didn't know what to make of it. As he neared the track, the blue car disappeared from his rear-view mirror.

Dale spent a futile afternoon at the track searching for Gibson and trying to pick a winner. The only thing that kept the afternoon from being a complete disaster was a 3-to-1 shot named Ask The Guy in the fifth race. He cashed in his $10 win ticket and bought himself a burger. Dale left the track at the end of the day despairing of

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ever finding Gibson in Hot Springs.

It was seven o'clock that evening when the old woman banged on Dale's door and told him he had a phone call. He followed her downstairs and picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Mr. Smith?"

"Yes."

"My name is Larry Curtis. I got some information on that guy you're looking for, if you're still interested."

"I'm interested," Dale said.

Dale arranged to meet Curtis in the lobby of a downtown hotel in ten minutes. Dale was there in five and so was Curtis, a lanky young man with a large Adam's apple, easily recognizable by his purple shirt and red tie described over the telephone.

"Mr. Curtis, I presume?" inquired Dale.

"Right you are, Mr. Smith. Let's move on into the bar and find ourselves a seat."

Dale followed Curtis into the bar. A waitress came and took their order, whiskey for Dale, beer for Curtis. Dale paid for the drinks when they arrived and Curtis nodded his head in thanks. Curtis fished into his shirt pocket and laid a wallet-size picture of Gibson on the table.

"Just so there's no misunderstanding, Mr. Smith, you're going to pay me a hundred dollars if I tell you where to find the man in this picture, is that correct?"

"That's correct," said Dale. "You know where he is?"

"I surely do," Curtis said, taking a swallow of beer. "His name is Joe Stevens, from San Antonio, Texas, right?"

"Wrong," said Dale.

Curtis looked hurt. "That's what he told me his name was."

"Names aren't important," Dale said. "Describe your Joe Stevens to me."

"Looks just like the man in the picture," Curtis replied.

"No, no," Dale said impatiently. "Describe him to me—age, height, weight, hair color, color of eyes, does he wear glasses, scars and marks, dress, speech, peculiarities."

"Forty-five or fifty," Curtis began, "a big man, six feet, two hundred pounds at least, not much hair, balding just like in the picture—"

"Forget the picture," interrupted Dale. "It isn't a very good likeness. A thousand men could look like that picture."

"OK," Curtis said peevishly. "I don't remember the color of his eyes. No glasses. No scars or marks that I noticed. Dressed in a business suit. Nothing special

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about his speech to mark him—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Dale. "What about an accent? A guy from Texas has got to have an accent."

"I don't remember any accent," Curtis said in an Arkansas twang. "Talked just like you and me."

Dale shook his head and reached for his whiskey, swallowing it neat. "Where can I find this Joe Stevens?"

"He's registered here at the hotel."

"Staying here at this hotel, huh? What's his room number?"

"I said he was registered here, not that he was staying here," Curtis said with a sly smile.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean he's still registered here but he's staying somewhere else."

"OK, if you want to see that hundred bucks, where is he?"

"In the hospital," Curtis said triumphantly.

"What's he doing in the hospital?" Dale asked.

"He had a heart attack last Sunday night while he was eating dinner. I'd spent Sunday afternoon showing him around Razorback Hills. That's a real estate development a few miles outside of town. I'm a salesman there. Stevens told me he came here every year for the racing season. He was looking for a good cash buy, said he intended to retire here eventually. I tried to put him into our two-bedroom ranch that sells for $20,000. He said he would sleep on it and we could get together for breakfast. When I came to the hotel Monday morning, they told me he was in the hospital. I didn't get to see him until Tuesday when he was moved out of intensive care. By then he had lost interest in real estate. Just wanted to get out of the hospital and go home."

"What's stopping him?" Dale asked.

"The doctor ordered him to stay in the hospital for a week of rest and observation. He should be discharged tomorrow."

"Any relatives hanging around the hospital?"

"No, he's a widower. Got no close kin, he told me."

"His luggage still here at the hotel?"

"Guess so," Curtis said. "He was real worried about it when I saw him Tuesday. Asked me to bring some money back to the hotel to apply on his bill."

"Where's the hospital?" Dale asked.

"Just a couple of blocks from here. And Stevens is definitely the man in your picture. Do I get the hundred now?"

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"If Stevens is the man I'm looking for, you'll get your money. Let's take a walk."

Dale and Curtis left the hotel and headed for the hospital. A faint ember of hope started to blaze in Dale's mind. This could be it, the payoff of a lifetime. A well-dressed, dark-haired man followed them from the hotel and tailed along behind to the hospital.

Curtis led the way to Stevens' hospital room and entered first. "Hiya, Mr. Stevens. I brought someone to see you."

Dale came into the room and immediately felt a tremendous letdown as he and Stevens stared blankly at each other. Curtis looked almost as disappointed as Dale.

"Sorry," Dale said, and left Curtis to explain to Stevens.

In the lobby of the hospital, the well-dressed, dark-haired man who had been tailing Dale walked up to him and flashed a badge. "Detective-Sergeant Parker. I'd like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Dale."

"So you know my name," Dale said.

"Routine car registration check. I've been following you since yesterday when you showed Gibson's picture at the track. We were alerted by the FBI."

"I've noticed you following me. Maybe you should try a different line of work."

Parker's face reddened. "You should talk. I tailed around after you, thinking you might lead me to Gibson. And now I find you're a thousand miles out of position."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dale asked.

"I just called headquarters and they brought me up to date. John Gibson walked into the Federal Building in Motor City this afternoon and gave himself up. He never left Motor City. Appears he was holed up with some woman in a run-down apartment hotel named the Glen Gable. Ever heard of it?"

Good soldier that he was, Dale hardly flinched. He knew the Glen Gable well. He had lived there for the past five years.

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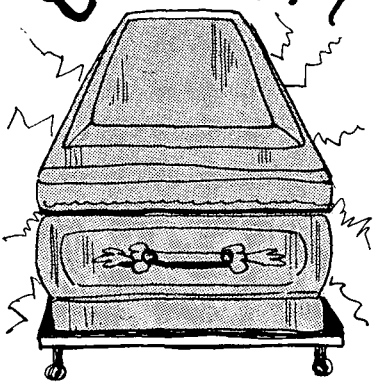
Having the last word may not prove as satisfying as enjoying the final gratification.

Cassie's Coffin



by Robert Hoskins

The day Aunt Cassie was finally killed, some people seemed to think the sun shone a little brighter.

Every town has its Cassie, of course: a prying, spying, gossiping, vindictive old witch. She was the kind of woman you cross the street to avoid, her sour mouth moving nonstop from morning till night. Sometimes it seemed as though she didn't even care whether or not anyone was listening to her—the talking was all that mattered.

Cassie's sole philosophy in life was to say *something* about everybody. If there was nothing good, then say something bad. If there was nothing at all, then go back to ancient history, or talk about the victim's mother, father, distant cousin from Syracuse. In every family closet was something dirty enough to warrant Cassie's public laundering. Of course, the really juicy things she kept to herself . . .

Aunt Cassie was also a blackmailer.

She didn't do it for money, though—she never spent the money she already had, which was a pretty decent income from her father. Cassie was my father's aunt, and she controlled the purse strings of the family, kept them pulled tight, never letting out a

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cent. Ever since I can remember, money has always been a bone of contention between my mother and my father, with Cassie there in the background of every argument. She knew it, too, and delighted in seeing Dad's long face walk by her house in the morning as he went to work.

Mom wanted Dad to leave town, strike out on his own—but he wouldn't. He never dared leave the promise of all that money. Sometimes I actually thought I could see my mother shrink after another losing session.

The prize Cassie valued most was power. Nothing pleased her so much as to be able to hold a secret over someone, anyone, knowing that she controlled their destiny.

It was no wonder that the whole town hated her.

Well, almost the whole town: she did have two friends. There's old Mrs. Dutton, who's well up in her eighties now and so deaf that she can't hear anybody, so she doesn't hear Cassie running down everyone else; and there's Liz Finnegan, everybody's third-grade teacher, who was born prune-faced and who hasn't improved any in disposition since the School Board forced her to retire at age sixty-five, four or five years ago. Finnegan was of the old ruler-across-the-knuckles school of discipline, of which Cassie heartily approved. I don't know that either of them would have sunk to pulling wings off flies, but Cassie seemed to like anything that hurt people.

Of course there's Uncle Bill. He married Cassie about forty years ago, and actually lived with her for ten years. Her talk finally drove him from the house, to take up residence in one of the town's two hotels, but he maintains to this day that he always *liked* her—he just couldn't stand her.

Bill was a prime suspect for a while, when it was discovered that Cassie still had a twelve-thousand-dollar life insurance policy in force, with him as beneficiary—but he was alibied, even though his laundry bag was on Cassie's front porch. He proved that he had tossed it there on his way to work at the furniture factory that morning. Although they had lived apart for thirty years, Cassie still did his washing and mending every week. Usually he avoided meeting her face to face, she leaving the finished laundry at the hotel while he was at work. On those occasions when he was caught, he never had more than three things to say to her: "Hello, Cassie;" "Good-bye, Cassie;" and "No, Cassie." The last is what he said

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when she asked, as she did every time, if he wasn't over his nonsense yet and ready to come home.

Chris Lane found her. Chris is the town's chief and only cop. He stopped by Cassie's house when Hal Attucks at the post office noticed that she hadn't come in for her morning mail. Not that Chris particularly wanted to talk to Cassie—he liked her no more than the rest of the townspeople—but it was his responsibility as officer of the law and deputy sheriff, and she was getting up there in age. She could have had a stroke, or fallen, or something.

As hated as she was, people really didn't expect her to be murdered.

Chris found her on the kitchen floor. Her head had been battered in with a stick of stove wood. The old wood range had served her mother, and it served her as well—and I had to admit that she was talented in its uses. No matter what her other failings, Cassie was a superior cook. There was always a tray of cookies and doughnuts in the winter, or a fresh blackberry pie or wild strawberry shortcake in the summer. That's why I never protested too loudly when Dad made me come by to do the lawn or chop the wood for her—most of the time I could take the cookies or whatever with me, and even if I had to sit at the table with the shortcake I could close my ears and pretend she wasn't there racketing away in the background.

Chris called in the state troopers and their investigators right away, knowing that murder was out of his league. He could handle obstreperous drunks with the best of them, and knew enough about most families in town to settle their fights before they reached bloodshed, but Chris was completely aware of his limits.

For a time there were more people tramping in and out of that old house than had been there in all the years since Bill walked out. If she could know, Cassie must have been in her glory being in the center of the scandal.

The sum total of their dozens of hours of investigation was zilch; nothing. My fingerprints were all over the ax and the woodpile, of course, but the only prints on the stick that did her in were blurred, as though someone had deliberately tried to smear things. There wasn't a thing in the house to point a guilty finger in any direction.

Outside the house was a different matter—but how can you accuse a whole town?

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Final verdict: death by person or persons unknown.

Bill took over the funeral arrangements, selected the casket, even picked out the dress in which she was laid out. Cassie already had her plot, of course—one of the prettiest spots in the cemetery, under a shade tree but near the county road so that she could keep tabs on the action, cluck at the youngsters using the cemetery drive as a lover's lane. There was talk that the Reverend Sloan had to be pressured into giving the service.

The day of the funeral the Presbyterian church was packed, as though everybody in town had come to be sure that she was really gone—or at least going. I went up to Mom's bedroom with Dad, where he tried to insist that she come to the funeral with us, but she hadn't been out of the house for six months, since last Christmas or before. She retreated to her room right after every meal, a thirty-five-year-old woman who looked sixty. When she first heard the news about Cassie's death she had seemed to brighten, and I thought that maybe lifting this particular monkey from her back would do something for her—but I guess it was too late. Cassie was in her coffin and Mom was still walking around, but inside she was just as dead as Cassie.

The casket was carried into the church by the funeral-home employees, Uncle Bill right there with them, fussing to make sure that everything was done right, placed right. They set it on the rolling cart and moved it down front, then took themselves out of the way. The minister mounted his pulpit, and was just getting ready to start, when suddenly Cassie's voice boomed out into the church.

"George Armstrong, on March 14, 1948, you drove Lora Tyner to an abortionist in Ontario. He butchered his job, and she died carrying your child.

"Philip Campbell, in June, 1943, you paid one thousand dollars each to three members of the county Selective Service Board, to record you as a 4-F exemption, even though you passed the physical.

"Davis Harnett, on September 25, 1963, you—"

"Turn it off!" Tal Harnett was on his feet, shouting to drown out what she was saying about his brother.

Others were up, shaking fists, crying out, "Stop it! Somebody do something! Stop her!"

Uncle Bill was in the first pew with Dad and me. I looked at him

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and saw that he was smiling. I don't know how he did it—pressure-sensitive switch, maybe, or perhaps he activated the tape recorder when the casket was set down in the vestibule. However it happened, it was having the desired effect—Cassie's funeral was the most scandalous occasion in the history of the town. People were emptying out of the church, others coming up to demand that the minister do something, *somebody* do something. Some of them were even trying to find where the recorder was hidden—but Bill is a master cabinetmaker. The volume was loud enough that it seemed to be coming from every side of the casket at once.

Things calmed down after a while, of course, although the tape didn't run out for almost fifteen minutes. There were plenty of interested listeners to stay to the end, for not everybody in town had done something bad enough to join Cassie's dishonor roll—or been caught at it. Not that she hadn't tried—she had even tried to set me up one time, with a five-dollar bill sticking obviously out of the sugar bowl. She would never have given me the money, of course, even in payment for the chores I did for her—but she knew I needed five bucks so I could get my bike fixed.

In time we got to the cemetery, although Liz Finnegan, Dad, Bill and I were the only ones to stay through the whole thing at the graveside. As we left the church Dad told me that I could go home, but for Mom's sake I wanted to see it through to the end.

We watched them lower the casket into the grave as the minister uttered the last prayer, and then Liz and Dad were leaving. I hung back a moment when I saw that Bill wasn't moving, and came up behind him. He didn't notice me—people usually don't notice a thirteen-year-old kid when he's trying to be quiet.

He spoke down into the grave. "I mailed the evidence to the county prosecutor, Cassie, all of it, just like you wanted. They're already running, those whose crimes are not covered by the statute of limitations, and the rest are ruined in this town. I still don't know which one of them did it, but the murderer is suffering just like the rest of them. He's paying!"

He's wrong, of course—I didn't take the money she planted, or fall for any other of Cassie's dirty tricks. She never had anything at all on me.

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Certain pain killers are numerous, but we may be grateful for the infrequency of one so definitive.

Pain Killer

Mrs. Nellie Campbell looked like the average man's idea of middle-aged motherhood, but she soon made it apparent that she wasn't averse to sucking a little blood when it was necessary.

"What do you charge for your

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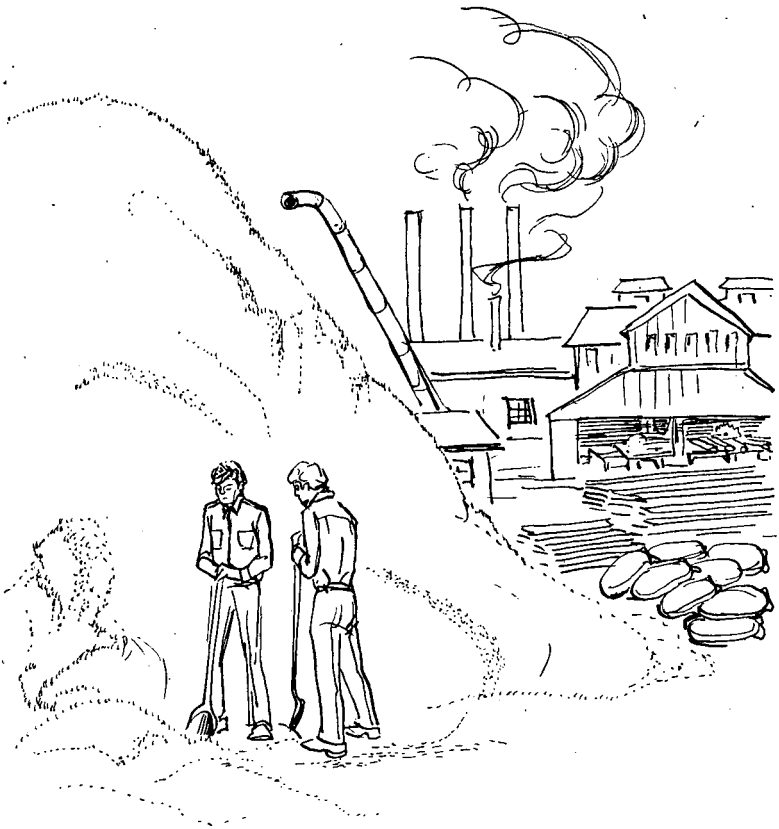
services?" she asked at once, blue eyes pinpoint sharp behind granny glasses.

"Top dollar," I said.

"I'd thank you to be a bit more specific, sir." The snappish tone of voice belied the matronly softness of the mouth.

"All right, ma'am. I never take a case unless I feel I can give the client satisfaction for the money spent, and then the fee is a hun-



a Novelette by Frank Sisk

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dred dollars a day and expenses, with a minimum of two hundred down."

"I'd call that pretty exorbitant, Mr. Pilgrim."

"Call it what you wish, Mrs. Campbell."

"What falls under expenses?"

"Anything I can think of," I replied, perversely enjoying myself. "Booze is a big item. I get my shoes shined a lot. I'm a heavy tipper. Then there's always the laundry bill. And incidentals."

"I'd require an itemized list," Mrs. Campbell said tartly.

"Back off a little, dear lady. You haven't bought anything yet and I'm not in much of a selling mood today."

She studied me for a few seconds and then changed tack, close hauling to windward the maternal side of her nature. "Forgive me, Mr. Pilgrim. This brusque manner isn't like me at all. I've been walking around on raw nerves these last few days."

"That's better," I said, settling back in my creaky swivel chair. "What's the trouble?"

"Mr. Cassidy hasn't been back to his room since the day before yesterday."

"Why don't we pick it up from the beginning?"

Sighing, she took a lace handkerchief from her purse and dabbed moisture from her brow. "I operate a rooming house on Osprey Avenue," she began. "One twenty-three. A fairly good residential section as you probably know. I've been in the business for nine years, ever since the death of my husband, and I've always been very selective about those I take in. Gentlemen only. No meals except dinner and that's optional. I've learned through experience to prefer gentlemen who are along in years. Their habits are set and predictable. At present I have six gentlemen in the house, that's counting Mr. Cassidy who left two mornings ago and hasn't been back since. I can't understand how poor Mr. Cassidy, crippled as he is, could disappear within a block of the house."

"Is he able to walk?"

"At a snail's pace. He suffers from arthritis of the hip. He needs two canes to walk with. He never goes far. To the bar and grill at the corner, less than a block away. Milt's, it's called."

"He's a drinker?"

"He drinks in moderation. Something to ease his pain. He goes to Milt's for companionship as much as anything else."

"Do you take a personal interest in all your roomers?"

"Yes. But you're right in thinking that Mr. Cassidy is somewhat

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special. He's been with me since the beginning, nine years ago."

"And he's never taken off like this?"

"Not once. He's a man of simple routine."

"Please fill that in."

"Well, I serve him breakfast every day at eight on the dot."

"Didn't you just say that dinner was the only meal you offered?"

"That's so in the case of the others. Because of Mr. Cassidy's physical condition I've made an exception. I give him lunch too."

"Go on."

"He's a most courteous gentleman and easy to cater to. For breakfast it's a small glass of tomato juice, one poached egg on unbuttered rye toast and two cups of black coffee without sugar. Then he goes to his room with the morning paper to do the crossword puzzle. His room is on the ground floor at the front of the house, a nice sunny room with a bay window. One of the doors—there're two of them—opens on the hallway and the other lets out onto the veranda, which in effect gives him his own private entrance. The nice thing about the veranda is that at one end of it, the end near the driveway, there's a wooden ramp, and Mr. Cassidy always uses this instead of the stairs. It's a lot easier for him."

"What's his routine after the crossword—a trip to Milt's?"

"Yes, he goes to Milt's every morning."

"On foot, rain or shine?"

"Not on foot if the weather's bad. When there's rain or snow or ice on the street, he always calls a cab. He has his own phone."

"The day before yesterday—Wednesday—was clear and dry, as I remember."

"Yes, a lovely day."

"So we may assume that Mr. Cassidy went on foot to his favorite neighborhood bar."

"He may have started out for Milt's but he never got there, Mr. Pilgrim. That's what puzzles me. A man of such routine—"

"What time did he generally leave the house?"

"Around nine-thirty."

"Do you hear him leave?"

"Sometimes I do, depending on where I am in the house. If I'm upstairs in my own room, which is also a front one, I sometimes see him going down the street."

"What about this particular morning, ma'am?"

"I think I heard him leave. I'm not sure."

"All right. He normally goes without fail to Milt's and stays—"

"The man there—Milt himself, it may have been—told me Mr. Cassidy hadn't missed more than a

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few mornings in the last five years. That must have been one of the rare occasions when he had a cold."

"But he didn't show up there Wednesday?"

"That's what the man told me."

"You inquired by phone, not in person?"

"I don't go into places like that, Mr. Pilgrim."

"I quite understand, Mrs. Campbell. When did you make the inquiry?"

"Around two o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Cassidy liked his lunch at twelve-thirty and he was as punctual as trains used to be. When he failed to appear I began to worry and I finally placed the first call around two. I placed a second one shortly after six. I serve dinner at six sharp and Mr. Cassidy was always prompt. But the man at Milt's—a different voice this time—said nobody in the place had seen Mr. Cassidy all day."

"Does he have a relative he might be visiting?"

"He doesn't have a soul in the world. He never married because of his disability. He was the only child of a couple who died when he was still in college. His last living relative, a cousin, went to Africa several years ago on some sort of archaeological expedition and was fatally bitten by a fly with a funny name."

"Tsetse?"

"That's the one."

"Do you happen to have a picture of Cassidy?"

"I do." She dug into her purse. "I take snapshots of all the gentlemen at Christmas. Does this mean you're going to look into Mr. Cassidy's disappearance?"

"If you still don't think my minimum's too exorbitant." I examined the color print she handed me. Cassidy was depicted leaning on his canes, a Christmas tree in the background. He had a long Gaelic nose dominant on a narrow face. The smile on his thin-lipped mouth was touched with pain. There was pain in the blue eyes too. Cassidy appeared to be in his early sixties. From an inked notation in the snapshot's lower right corner—*Dec. 24, 1974*—I knew it was recent.

"What's Cassidy's given name?"

"Dermot," she said. "Dermot Leo Cassidy."

"One more question."

"Yes."

"How is he fixed financially?"

"I'd say he was quite comfortable."

If you discount the arthritis, I thought.

Mrs. Nellie Campbell left my

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office at 4:25 p.m. I left it thirty minutes later and drove crosstown to Osprey Avenue and the Harrod Street corner where Milt was doing a slow-paced neighborhood business.

"Are you Milt?" I asked a white-jacketed fatso behind the bar.

"In the office." He jerked a plump thumb toward a closed door next to one marked GENTS.

I walked over there and knocked.

"Come on in," a husky voice said.

Opening the door, I saw a room barely big enough to hold a small desk, a comfortless wooden chair, an old safe, a new-looking calculator on a castered table, and a tall thin man with a gray handlebar moustache. The man was sitting in the chair, an unlighted cigar in his mouth, a printed coil of paper in his hand.

"My name's Jake Pilgrim," I said. "Can I have a few minutes of your time, Milt?"

"Why not."

"I'm looking for Dermot Cassidy, one of your regulars."

Milt removed the cigar from his mouth. "Dermot. That the old boy's name? Dermot. That's a new one, all right. Cassidy's all we call him in here."

"I understand he comes by for a drink or two every morning of the week."

"That's a fact. Except the last three days. He dint show today, yesday, or the day before, either. Some dame phone in about him, I think it was Wensday. But I coont tell her nothin'."

"That's why I'm here. She's worried about him."

"That ud be Mrs. Campbell, I guess."

"You know her?"

"Enough to tip my hat to. She don't come in here. I knew Cassidy been rentin' a room off her for years. She's the dame phoned in."

"I know."

Milt thoughtfully returned the cigar to his mouth. "You sayin' Cassidy ain't been home in three days?"

"Not since Wednesday."

"Son of a gun. He sure ain't built for travel. Peggin' along on them two canes of his. Takes him all of an hour to make it here from his room. Less'n block away. Where'd a poor old codger like that get to?"

"Maybe you can help me find out, Milt."

"You tell me how."

"Tell me about the people he knew in here, the ones he was particularly friendly with."

"Lessee now." Milt chomped at

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the cigar. "He never really's been what you call close friends with nobody. By the way, Jake, you some kinda detective?"

"The private kind, Milt."

"Uumm . . . Well, Cassidy's a character keeps to himself. Polite, sure, but not a big mixer. Likes to sit in the booth near the door and look out the winda. Sips his Irish on the stones and watches the Fords go by. A quiet customer. Oh, yeah, he use to pass the time a day with Jack Wheat, the weather, baseball, things like that. Jack musta had the world's worse headache. He receive a concussion, the way I heard, when he drove a jeep over a land mine in Italy during Number Two. Could knock off a quart of hard stuff and hardly show it at all and still have that headache."

"Does Wheat still come in here?"

"No. Six, seven months ago he retired from whatever he was doin'—somethin' with real estate—and went south to fish. Ain't seen him since. Sam Patterson. Yeah, Sam and Cassidy use to buy a round back and forth, thinkin' prolly that each round might be the last. Sam was sufferin' from a bad case of cancer. Lungs, I think, but he never said. But a couple months ago he ups and goes to England where I hear some of his folks live. Lately it's been Jerry Barron and Jonesy. And believe me, Barron's not the easiest guy in the world to socialize with. Poor devil's got a set a bleedin' ulcers you got to soften his damn brandy with heavy cream, but him and Cassidy hit it off pretty good. Both sorry they voted for Nixon."

"Sounds like you run an outpatient clinic," I said.

Milt shrugged. "Well, you know, birds of a feather." He picked a lighter off the desk and finally lit the cigar. "I been trying to give these things up."

"Cassidy was here Tuesday for the last time. Right?"

"Right. It rain cats and dogs. He come by cab."

"What kind of cab?"

"The usual. Red Top. He always use Red Top. And the same driver mostly."

"Oh?"

"An old-timer name Rizzo."

There were a few more questions I should have asked but I didn't think of them until later. Milt was beginning to glance longingly at the coil of calculator paper on his desk and that probably put me off. Anyway I thought, mistakenly, that I'd got from him all he could give, and so I thanked him and left.

Red Top is the smallest cab

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company in town. As a result, they try hardest. They don't cruise the streets in search of fares. They work by appointment only.

The girl behind the Red Top desk in the lobby of the Columbia Hotel was plain-looking, competent and pleasant.

In response to my question she consulted the vertical division sorter on her desk, flipping deftly through the cards behind the C-tab. "Mr. Cassidy is one of our regular clientele," she commented. "Yes, here it is. Our Number Six cab picked him up twice this week. Tuesday and Wednesday."

"How about Wednesday?"

"The pickup time was nine thirty-five. The place was 123 Osprey Avenue. We took him to 355 Main Street. The arrival time was nine-fifty."

"Isn't that the address of a bank building?"

"Yes. The First National Trust."

"Who was the driver?"

"George Rizzo."

"Where can I reach him?"

"He's off duty now, sir. He'll be back on at eight tomorrow morning. Pardon me. Tomorrow's Saturday. His day off."

"Can you tell me where he lives?"

"I'm not supposed to do that." The young lady hesitated. "I *could* give you his phone number."

"That'll do the job admirably."

She took a leather memo book from the desk drawer, turned a few pages, and read it to me. Then she checked her wristwatch. "If I were you I wouldn't phone until after six-thirty. Right now he's listening to the six-o'clock news and surely hates to be interrupted."

I thanked her for the tip and gave her one in return—a dollar under the blotter.

When the newscaster signed off on the car radio, I got out and walked over to the outdoor phone booth near Lesinski's Cordial Shop. Rizzo answered immediately with a double "Hullo." After identifying myself and explaining how I happened to have his number, I went into the subject of Cassidy.

"When you let him off Wednesday morning at the First National Trust Building," I asked, "did he mention anyone he was going to see?"

"Just the bank. He's goin' inna bank to get some cash."

"Did he ask you to wait for him?"

"The other way around. I ask Mr. Cassidy if he want me to wait. He say no, not to bother. A friend gonna pick him up in ten minutes. That's it. He pay me off. I drive away. Somethin' happen to

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him?" asked the concise cabby.

"I don't know yet, George."

"I sure hope not. Mr. Cassidy a nice gent."

Hanging up, I entered Lesinski's Cordial Shop and purchased a fifth of Polish vodka and took it back to my apartment where I intended to broil three thick lamb chops and call it a day.

Propped up in bed with three pillows, I was nearly finished with the Wall Street edition of the local newspaper when my sleepy eyes caught a small headline.

BODY FOUND
IN SAWDUST

I read the story because sawdust seemed such a unique material to drop a body in.

"The body of an unidentified man was found buried this morning in a mountain of sawdust outside a sawmill operated at 2277 Artery Blvd. by the D&S Lumber Co.

"Sidney Farnsworth, company manager, said the sawdust represented a year's accumulation from the mill and was in the process of being bagged for shipment to a customer when the body was discovered.

"Police estimate the man had been dead six months. He is described as 60 to 65, medium height and well-dressed. No means of immediate identification were found on the body.

"Dr. Robert J. Terry, medical examiner, stated that the deceased has a metal plate set in the right temple, possibly as the result of a war wound. Exact cause of death has not yet been ascertained, Terry said."

I fell asleep a few minutes later but this story was unaccountably still adhering to my memory when I woke in the morning.

After breakfast I drove over to Osprey Avenue for a chat with Mrs. Campbell. The house was a big battleship-gray affair looming close to the street. I parked the vehicle in the driveway and ascended the wooden ramp favored by Cassidy. I passed Cassidy's bay window and his private entrance and rang the bell at the main door.

Mrs. Campbell answered in her working clothes—a bright gingham dress and a spotless white apron. "Do you have any news, Mr. Pilgrim?" she asked by way of greeting.

"Let's say I know a couple of things I didn't know yesterday," I said.

"Please come in."

"Thank you."

"I was just having a second cup of coffee. Would you care to join me?"

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"Thanks just the same, but I'd like to take a look at Cassidy's room if you don't mind."

"Why certainly." She turned and opened a door to the left. "This is it."

I followed her across the threshold. The room contained a neatly made-up double bed, a rocker and an easy chair, a portable TV set on a round table, a telephone on a bedside table, a floor lamp near a desk, a tall chest of drawers and a large oval-shaped hooked rug. "Very comfortable," I said.

"It suits him. What have you found out, Mr. Pilgrim?"

"I found out he left here by taxi Wednesday."

She arched her brows. "I wonder why. It was a lovely day."

"He went directly to the First National Trust."

"In the middle of the month. That's odd."

"What's odd about it?"

"Mr. Cassidy always does his banking on the first of the month. Unless it falls on a weekend. I wonder—" She went briskly to the desk, pulled open a side drawer and lifted out a strongbox. Setting it on the desk top, she reached for a glass jar full of paper clips. She stirred the clips around with a forefinger until she uncovered a small key. This key fit the keyhole in the strongbox. She turned it and raised the cover. So much for Cassidy's privacy.

I watched closely as she shuffled through the contents. Bonds, stock certificates, a checkbook, several sheets of parchment-like paper stapled together, two bankbooks.

"His First National passbook is missing," Mrs. Campbell said, looking annoyed.

"He probably made a withdrawal Wednesday."

"He never said a word about it."

"Does he generally discuss such matters with you?"

"He generally does. He values my advice."

"The cabdriver says Cassidy had a ten-o'clock appointment with somebody at the bank. Any idea who it might have been?"

"No, I don't." Anger was beginning to tinge her annoyance. "But I'm going to get a few answers."

She went to the bedside phone, grabbed the receiver and, after a moment's thought, dialed a number. "I introduced Mr. Cassidy to the First National Trust when he came to live here. I think they owe me— Hello! May I speak to Mr. Shumway, please?" Waiting, she turned to gaze out the bay window.

I dipped into the open strongbox. The sheaf of parchmentlike

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paper proved to be exactly what I suspected—the last will and testament of Dermot Cassidy.

"Good morning, Mr. Shumway." Mrs. Campbell was still watching the outdoor scene. "This is Nellie Campbell . . . That's nice of you to say . . . Quite well, yes . . . The reason I'm calling you personally is . . ."

I began to scan the will. Following the prologue were a number of trifling bequests—$25 to the local branch of the Humane Society, $100 to the Arthritis Foundation, $50 to the Knights of Columbus, that sort of thing. Then came the real beneficiary of all that was left—Mrs. Nellie Campbell, described by the testator as "a good friend and true."

This good friend, on the horn to a bank official at a time as unlikely as Saturday morning, appeared to be getting a few answers which weren't happy ones.

". . . and you say he insisted on having that amount of money in cash? . . . It's so out of character for him . . . Yes, I see . . . Wasn't the teller curious? . . . That's understandable . . . Did the guard recognize the . . . Well, thank you, Mr. Shumway."

Cradling the phone, Mrs. Campbell turned slowly from the window. An expression of perplexity had driven away anger.

"I thought banks were closed Saturdays," I said.

"To the general public."

"That's me, I guess."

"Mr. Shumway and some of his people are usually at the First National Trust until noon."

"What did he have to say?"

"He said Mr. Cassidy withdrew five thousand dollars Wednesday morning. All in cash, all in twenties." She added with a note of sorrow: "He left a balance of fifteen thousand."

"Placed against the assets in the strongbox, that's not a bad estate," I said. "What else did Shumway tell you?"

"He said Harold Keeler, one of the bank guards, went to the entrance with Mr. Cassidy and saw him assisted into the front seat of a green van by some man. He didn't know who this man was."

"Did he notice the license plate?"

"Not at all, according to Mr. Shumway. But this is understandable when you consider that Harold Keeler is an old man, on the verge of retirement, with extremely poor eyesight. All he was certain of is the van was green."

There certainly was a plethora of elderly gentlemen cluttering up this case with their failing faculties, I reflected. I said aloud, "I happened to notice, Mrs. Camp-

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bell, that you're the residuary legatee of Cassidy's estate."

"You happened to." Blue eyes flashed icily behind the granny glasses. "You had no right, sir, to touch a thing in that strongbox." She came quickly across the room and slammed the cover shut.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but after watching you unlock it and rummage through the contents I kind of got the impression the box was practically in the public domain."

"I'll have you understand that Mr. Cassidy showed me where he kept the strongbox and the key and told me what to do in case of emergency."

"Did he also show you the will?"

"A long time ago." There seemed to be a hint of real tears in her eyes.

"It was witnessed six years ago," I said.

"Then that's when he showed it to me, back about that time."

"Am I fired?"

"Most definitely not." She took a handkerchief from the apron pocket and blew her nose. "Don't forget you're paid up till tomorrow afternoon."

Back at my office I collected the mail and the morning paper from the floor below the slot in the door. The mail contained a few bills and a nice check from a recent client. The newspaper contained, on the front page this time, another body in the D&S Lumber Company's pile of sawdust.

Going to the inner office, I took a swig straight from the vodka bottle in my desk drawer and then sat down to absorb this new development.

The angle taken by the press was that it was hard to believe that two bodies of well-dressed elderly men, both discovered in the same heap of sawdust within 24 hours of each other, could not be identified by police and that the cause of death in either case had allegedly not yet been determined. How long does an autopsy take? the press wondered. How many more bodies are concealed beneath the sawdust? it speculated. There is a hell of a lot more here than officials are admitting, it hinted.

I kind of agreed with the press.

Reaching for the phone, I put through a call to Captain Thomas McFate of Homicide. I was told it was his day off. I told the cop on the switchboard that I knew from long experience that McFate never took a day off when there were two embarrassing cadavers on ice. The cop said his orders

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were not to disturb Captain McFate on his day off unless some critical emergency came up. I said I stood ready to help McFate comb sawdust out of his hair.

"Give him that message," I said, "and tell him it comes from Jake Pilgrim."

Ten minutes later McFate phoned me.

"All right, Jake," he said. "What the hell you up to this time?"

"Like you, Tom, I'm trying to get to the bottom of all that sawdust over on Artery Boulevard."

"Stow that. The wisenheimers from the papers have been pounding me with lines like that since breakfast. Just tell me what you know that I should know."

"Better yet, let's swap."

"Swapping with you, Jake, is often one-way. Give, and maybe I'll give a little."

"That first stiff, the one Doc Roberts said has a metal plate in the right temple and dead about six months."

"What about it?"

"Maybe I can make an identification, Tom. How about that?"

"We already know who he is."

"You're keeping it from the press."

"I don't tell those fly suckers everything."

"In that case, what can I say? Except to say I'll see you later."

"Hold it, Jake. I'd still like to hear your guess."

"It's just a shot in the dark."

"Shoot."

"How does Jack Wheat grab you?"

The pause that followed was refreshingly pregnant.

"How did you make that ID?" McFate finally asked in a worried voice. "We pinned it down only an hour ago."

"Call it Pilgrim intuition, Tom."

"It's no joke, Jake. This business is one hell of a lot more serious than what appears on the surface. So once again. How did you make it John L. Wheat?"

"All right. Yesterday I went looking for a guy who hasn't been home for several days. My line of inquiry led me to his neighborhood saloon. Among the information I winnowed from the keeper were a few references to one Jack Wheat. Wheat and my own missing man were like drinking buddies."

"What's the name of this saloon, Jake?"

"Milt's. On the corner of Osprey and Harrod."

"Go on."

"Well, this Milt mentioned that Wheat had a terrible chronic headache as the result of an injury

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suffered during the Second World War. He thought it was a concussion. Anyway, the point here is that Wheat retired six months ago from whatever it was he did for a living—real estate, Milt thought it was—and went south to do some fishing—"

"He's right about the real estate," McFate said.

"What were his connections, Tom?"

"He was last employed by Somers and Crawford. I'm supposed to be asking the questions."

"Well, I'm just wondering if Wheat left the real estate business with the same finality as he left Milt's."

"As a matter of fact, he did. Gave his employers one week's notice."

"No postcards from Dixie, wishing they were there?"

"How the hell do I know? We haven't had time to dig into it like that. Now what do you say to my getting back to—"

"One more question, Tom, and I'm wholly at your service. Did you have a missing-persons complaint on Wheat?"

"No. Nobody knew he was supposed to be missing. The real-estate firm lists him as a bachelor with no close relatives. Now let's get back to you, Jake. Where'd you get your hunch that this body was that of John L. Wheat?"

"From osmosis, I guess. Last night, when I read that little story in the newspaper, a couple of things stuck in my mind. The plate in the head, the age of the corpse, the fact that the clothing was considered good. I might add I had partaken of vodka at the time."

"Sure."

"So let's say that through a process of vodka-induced osmosis I began to wonder, subconsciously perhaps, whether the man with the plate in his head suffered the kind of migraines attributed to Jack Wheat."

"You're not making much sense, Jake."

"Oh yes I am, Tom. Pain of one kind or another is the common denominator here. Wheat had headaches, Cassidy's got crippling arthritis—"

"Who the hell is Cassidy?"

"He's the man I'm looking for, the man who hasn't been home for a few days. To be perfectly honest, Tom, the osmotic process didn't begin to function until a short time ago when I picked up the morning paper and discovered that a second unidentified body had been sifted out of that lumber company's sawdust pile. The newspaper account quotes the police—Doc Terry, I suppose—as

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placing the time of death at two or three months ago. When I read this—and the fact that the deceased was probably sixty or so—my subconscious mind presented its file to my conscious mind."

"I'm glad to hear that," McFate said.

"The common denominator began to fractionalize. If two corpses are found in the same sawdust within twenty-four hours of each other, it seems safe to assume they were dumped by the same agency. As soon as the identity of Corpse Number One is established, the identity of Corpse Number Two should follow almost as a matter of routine. Whatever links them in death must have linked them in life. Find that link. For instance, if it's learned that both patronized the same gin mill—"

"Stop shifting gears, Jake. We already know who Number One is. We don't know yet the identity of Number Two. Do you?"

"A man named Sam Patterson, I think."

"What makes you think that?"

"A number of things. First, Patterson was a customer of Milt's. Second, he knew Wheat and Cassidy. Third, he is supposed to have gone to England about three months back—around the time Number Two went into the sawdust—and he hasn't been seen since at the old haunts. Fourth, he suffered much pain."

"This guy Milt should have the Osprey Avenue aspirin concession. What kind of pain?"

"I'm told Patterson had terminal lung cancer."

Again a pregnant pause.

"I'll be damned," McFate said grimly. "I got Terry's preliminary autopsy notes just as I phoned you. He's got it down in black and white—*lobal carcinoma.*"

"Poor Patterson," I said.

"Come in for a palaver, Jake."

"A little later."

"I want to see you now."

"A little later I'll know a little more, Tom. Meanwhile, I suggest that you nose into Wheat's financial affairs, and Patterson's too. My man Cassidy drew five biggies from a bank the day he disappeared."

"Come in and tell me more."

"I will, I will. What caused their death? Do you know that yet?"

"Yeah, we know. But I'm not discussing it over the phone. So come in."

"A little later," I said, hanging up.

I had a quick lunch in The Kosher Kitchen down the block from my office—lox and cream cheese

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on a warm bagel, a crisp dill pickle eight inches long, an icy glass of celery tonic—and then I maneuvered my eight-cylinder steed out of the jammed corral and pointed it in the direction of Osprey Avenue.

My wristwatch read 12:53 as I approached Milt's, which meant in a neighborhood like this on Saturday that it was as close to a rush hour as ever happened. The curbs on either side of Osprey were lined with vehicles and still others were grazing halfway down the Harrod Street block among the ONE HOUR PARKING signs. I found a gap between two compacts. Locking up, I started back to the corner. I was still about fifty feet from Milt's when the van pulled out of the line of cars parked on Harrod across Osprey. The van was green.

As it began to move off, I dashed to the corner and tried to read the rear license plate.

HB 7—

That's all I got—that and the fact that it was Rhode Island, not Connecticut.

Milt's was comparatively crowded but pleasantly sedate. At the bar men sat talking with friendly nods and agreeable smiles. In the booths bespectacled women sat with bejowled men who were obviously their husbands. Even a few kids were on the premises, sipping soda through straws. The jukebox, muted, was playing (of all things) Dooley Wilson's heart-catching rendition of *As Time Goes By*. For a moment I felt like Bogart striding through the bourgeoisie.

The fat bartender with the white jacket was officiating at the spigot. Before I could ask him where Milt was I spotted Milt myself. He was standing at the far end of the bar, stroking the right horn of the handlebar moustache and conversing with a pretty waitress.

Approaching, I said, "You seem to do all right weekends."

"Hiya, Jake," he said as if we'd known each other forever. "What ya drinkin'?"

"I'm buying, Milt. You name yours."

"A dropa Wile Turkey," he said. "What'sa latest scoop on Cassidy, pal? He still ain't been in."

The bartender placed two highballs on a tray and the waitress carried it all away.

"I'll have a vodka on the stones," I told him. "Give the boss a splash of Wild Turkey."

"Comin' up," the bartender said.

I turned back to Milt. "Who comes in here that drives a van, a

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green van from out of state?"

"Jeez, I can't say offhand."

"Rhode Island plates," I said.

"Rhode Islan' plates? Lessee now. Hey, Tiny," he called to the bartender. "Who we got come in here from Rhode Islan'? In a green van?"

"Jonesy," the bartender said as he poured. "From over there near Westerly. He got a van, green."

"Then it's Jonesy," Milt said. "No wool on Tiny's eyes."

"Jonesy," I said. "You mentioned his name yesterday as I remember. Him and somebody else, both friends of Cassidy's."

"I prolly did. What's with the van anyhow?"

"It's something that's come up. What's Jonesy's problem?"

"Prollem?" Milt squinted his puzzlement. "What kinda prollem you got in mind, Jake?"

"It seems everyone who sat down for a drink with Cassidy had some kind of ailment, Milt. Wheat had a headache, you said. Patterson had cancer. Some other joker had ulcers—"

"That's Jerry Barron with the ulcers," Tiny interposed, setting drinks in front of us.

"Jerry Barron, that's the other name," I said.

"He got ulcers, all right," Milt said.

"What's Jonesy got?" I asked.

"Not a damn thing far as I know," Milt said. "Cheers, Jake," he added, hoisting the shot of bourbon. "Jonesy's one a the healthy cats come in here. Ain't that right, Tiny?"

"Right," Tiny said. "He's still young and healthy, Jonesy is. Give him time, though."

"Then why does he chum with the walking wounded?" I asked.

"He wantsa help the poor devils," Milt said. "This Jonesy's quite a card. He been around the world a few times and he's got ideas. He seen the Chinks puhform like miracles with these needles. You know. What they call that deal with the needles, Tiny?"

"Agripuncture," Tiny said.

"Acupuncture," I said. "You mean Jonesy practices acupuncture?"

"Oh, no, not himself, Jake. But he got a contact, you know what I mean."

"Dr. Choo," Tiny added. "From Hong Kong."

With a swallow of vodka I digested this exotic bulletin. "Dr. Choo of Hong Kong yet. Is Jonesy fronting for Choo?"

"I never figure it like that," Milt said. "It's more like he could do ya a favor. You got a case hay fever he might help ya by puttin' this Chink in touch."

"How long has Jonesy been

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hanging out here?" I asked them.

"Five, six months."

"Closer to eight," Tiny amended.

"Tiny says eight, it's eight," Milt said. "Gizz another round, Tiny."

"Did Jonesy ever tell Jack Wheat that Dr. Choo could cure his headache?"

"He might of. I don't tune in alla yack goes on here." He took a cigar from his shirt pocket and began to strip off the cellophane wrapper. "But I did hear him talkin' needles to Cassidy."

"And Patterson?"

"Could be." When Tiny came with the second round, Milt said, "Is Jonesy toutin' this Hong Kong needler to our lame?"

"In a way," Tiny said. "He's kinda careful about it. This agripuncture ain't strictly legal, what I understand, so he's got to play it like a handbook, under the counter, sort of. He whispers a lot, Jonesy does."

"What's Jonesy look like?" I asked.

"Run a the mill," Milt said.

"Stands five seven," Tiny said.

"You could lose him in a crowded phone booth," Milt said, biting the tip off the cigar.

"Freckled face," Tiny said. "Reddish hair. Wears one a these corduroy hats with like a small brush in the band. Pink, the brush is."

"You coulda seen the creep in person," Milt said, "if ya come in ten minutes earlier. He was in the booth near the door—what we call Cassidy's booth—with old Jerry Barron. An hour they were there."

"Where's Barron now?" I asked.

Milt lit the cigar and blew smoke toward Tiny. "Yeah, where's Barron now?"

"He left with Jonesy," Tiny said.

I remember thinking *A fatal combination* and saying, "May I use your phone, Milt?"

"Help yourself, Jake. You know where the office is."

As I crossed the floor the jukebox was playing *They're Either Too Young or Too Old* and the feminine voice delivering the lyrics (I couldn't place it at first) was Bette Davis. In the office I dialed 911 and asked to be connected with McFate.

The unmarked police cruiser pulled to the curb in front of Milt's. The man at the wheel was a swarthy detective whose face was familiar but whose name temporarily escaped me. Sitting beside him, solid and saturnine, was McFate.

As I slid onto the rear seat he said without preface, "You were

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right about the money matters, Jake. In Wheat's case, at least."

"Yes?"

"A week before retirement he cashed an annuity that had been a fringe benefit from the real-estate firm he worked for. Sixty-five hundred smackeroos."

"What about Patterson? It *was* Patterson's body, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was Patterson's body, all right. We haven't had time yet to delve into his financial status, but we have found out from Customs that he hasn't gone to England any time in the past several months. He was a widower, by the way, and an insurance agent. He took a leave of absence from his company four months ago, giving ill health as the reason."

At this moment the shortwave radio crackled and then a stern masculine voice spoke.

"Patrol 109 reporting. We have just sighted a green van carrying Rhode Island plate number HB 769. Van is proceeding at moderate speed west on Carleton Avenue. Is this the van listed in red dispatch timed 1322 hours?"

McFate reached for the cruiser mike and spoke into it. "Patrol 109, Captain McFate calling. Overtake van and pass it slowly. If this is the one on red dispatch it should have two male occupants. Report back pronto. Over."

"The driver should be wearing a corduroy hat with a pink brush in the band," I said.

McFate nodded. "All right, Louis," he said. "Let's get over to Carleton Avenue."

That's when the detective's name came to me—Louis Castonous.

Castonous executed a U-turn. We were passing the Campbell house when Patrol 109 came back again with the information that two white males occupied the front seat of the van.

"Is the driver wearing a dinky corduroy hat with a pink brush in the band?" McFate asked.

"That is right, sir," replied the stern voice.

"Keep van under surveillance," McFate shot back. "Post us on any route changes. Over."

"Will do. Over."

McFate twisted around in the seat to look at me. "I hope you're sure of your ground, Jake."

"What makes you doubt it, Tom?"

"The way these men were murdered. I'd have sworn it was a godfather operation until I got your two-cents' worth."

"Just how were they murdered, Tom?"

"Old-time gangland style," he said morosely. "The ice pick with

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the soap handle. You know the technique."

It was perfected by Murder Incorporated before either of us was out of high school. The victim was slugged unconscious. An ice pick, from which the wooden handle had been sheared and a bar of soap substituted, was neatly inserted between the victim's ribs and into his heart. The soap had two advantages. It staunched the thin flow of blood coming from such a wound and it could be removed when the body was dumped. In many cases the ice pick was overlooked, recessed as it often was in fatty tissue, by a medical examiner who didn't feel like performing an autopsy. Hence, *cause of death undetermined.*

"Don't tell me Doc Terry didn't—" I began.

"Well, no. We knew from the very first body what caused death. We just kept it under our hat. In fact, kept the news of the first three bodies from the press."

"How many bodies have you found altogether?" I inquired, surprised.

"Five."

"How were you able to keep it quiet?"

"No missing-persons complaint on any of them. We hid them in the morgue and began to shake our stoolies out of the bushes."

The radio sputtered and broke into words.

"Patrol 109 to Captain McFate. The van under surveillance has turned off Carleton Avenue into George Street. It appears to be stopping—yes, it has come to a stop in front of—just a second, Skipper—in front of 111 George Street. Over."

McFate addressed the mike. "Patrol 109 proceed a few hundred feet beyond van and wait unobserved. This is McFate en route. Over."

"Who stumbled on Wheat and Patterson?" I asked.

"Some stupid woman reporter thought she'd do a feature story on how the city morgue functions and some stupid functionary down there told her how Wheat was found in a pile of sawdust. Fortunately he forgot about the three stiffs which preceded Wheat a month ago. We found those, all on the same day, in a pile of sand at Laurel Park, where Public Works was getting ready to build a swimming pool."

"Have you identified any of them?"

"We're pretty sure of one, but the others—" He shook his head in disgust. "They all died the same way—by ice pick. Another thing, Terry says there's evidence each

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one of them was chloroformed before being stabbed. That's what made us believe it was a Mafioso operation."

"It was an operation all right," I said. "Bought and paid for by Dr. Choo's victims."

"Who in hell is Dr. Choo?" McFate asked.

"I guess I failed to mention him when I phoned from Milt's. He's apparently an Oriental wizard this guy Jonesy is fronting for, a master of acupuncture. With his magic needles he permanently cures all ills. Migraine headaches, all forms of cancer, incurable arthritis, and maybe even bleeding ulcers if we don't get to his operating room on time."

"We'll get there on time," McFate said dourly. "You mean to tell me a barroom tout is able to sell a Chink quack to any old guy with an aching back and a bank account?"

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing the practice of acupuncture is illegal in this state except under certain conditions and in only a few select hospitals."

"So was booze illegal not so damned many years ago, but I understand people bought it by the barrel to drown their sorrows in. When your closest friend is pain, Tom, it's easy to be sold a panacea. Anything is worth trying."

"Of course you're right, Jake."

"And Jonesy seems to have chosen well. Bachelors, widowers, men with few human ties, men who would hardly be missed, but always men with enough money to pay for a gamble."

"At least somebody missed your man Cassidy," McFate said.

"His landlady," I said. "And from the way it looks now, she's going to inherit the rest of his money. She won't be missing him much longer."

In another few minutes we arrived at the corner of Carleton Avenue and George Street. Castonous found plenty of parking room behind the green van. As we climbed from the cruiser two uniformed cops approached and identified themselves as Patrol 109.

I looked at the facade of 111 George Street—an unimposing storefront—whose two display windows on either side of a screen door presented a sparse assortment of boxed noodles, cans of bamboo shoots and water chestnuts, bottles of soy sauce and a dusty box of fortune cookies. On the right window in the shape of an arch was the flecking gold-leaf legend ORIENTAL IMPORTERS.

"What are we waiting for?" McFate said and strode toward the screen door.

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Inside we encountered a middle-aged woman who looked as Chinese as Gina Lollobrigida.

"Sorry, we're closing for the rest of the afternoon," she said.

"You're closing for the rest of your life, lady," McFate said, easing her out of his path as he headed for a closed door behind the counter. When he opened the door the faint odor of chloroform assailed our nostrils.

The remainder of the story is a matter of record.

In a soundproof back room we found a man evidently known to McFate, to judge from the unceremonious way he clapped the cuffs on him. His name was Morrie Paznik, alias Dr. Choo. Jonesy was also present, still wearing the corduroy hat even though he was busy administering chloroform to a haggard-looking man who proved to be the ulcerous Jerry Barron. Barron was stretched out on an old pool table that had been covered by a white sheet.

We also found eight ice picks on the premises, one of which was already equipped with a handle fashioned from that soap that's advertised as being 99.44% pure. And down in the cellar, swaddled in burlap and tucked in an empty coal bin, we discovered the body of Dermot Leo Cassidy, probably waiting for a more permanent place of disposal.

A week later, after I'd mailed my expense account to Mrs. Campbell, she phoned to inform me in an uncompromising voice that she was deducting from her check the drinks I'd bought at Milt's.

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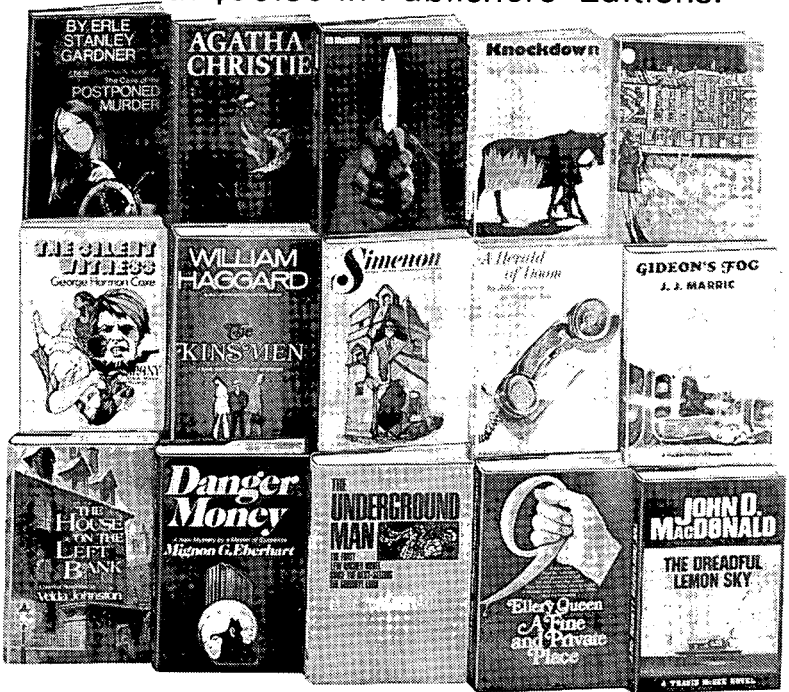

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